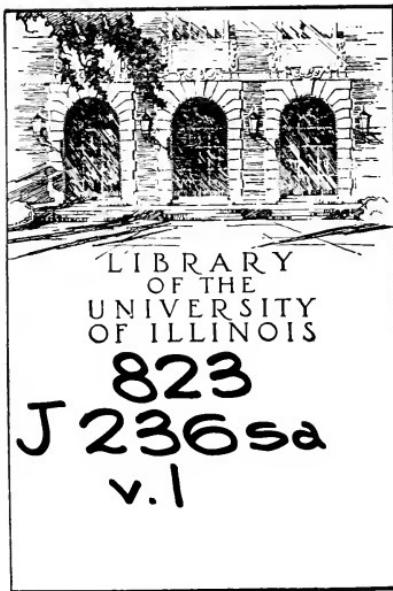


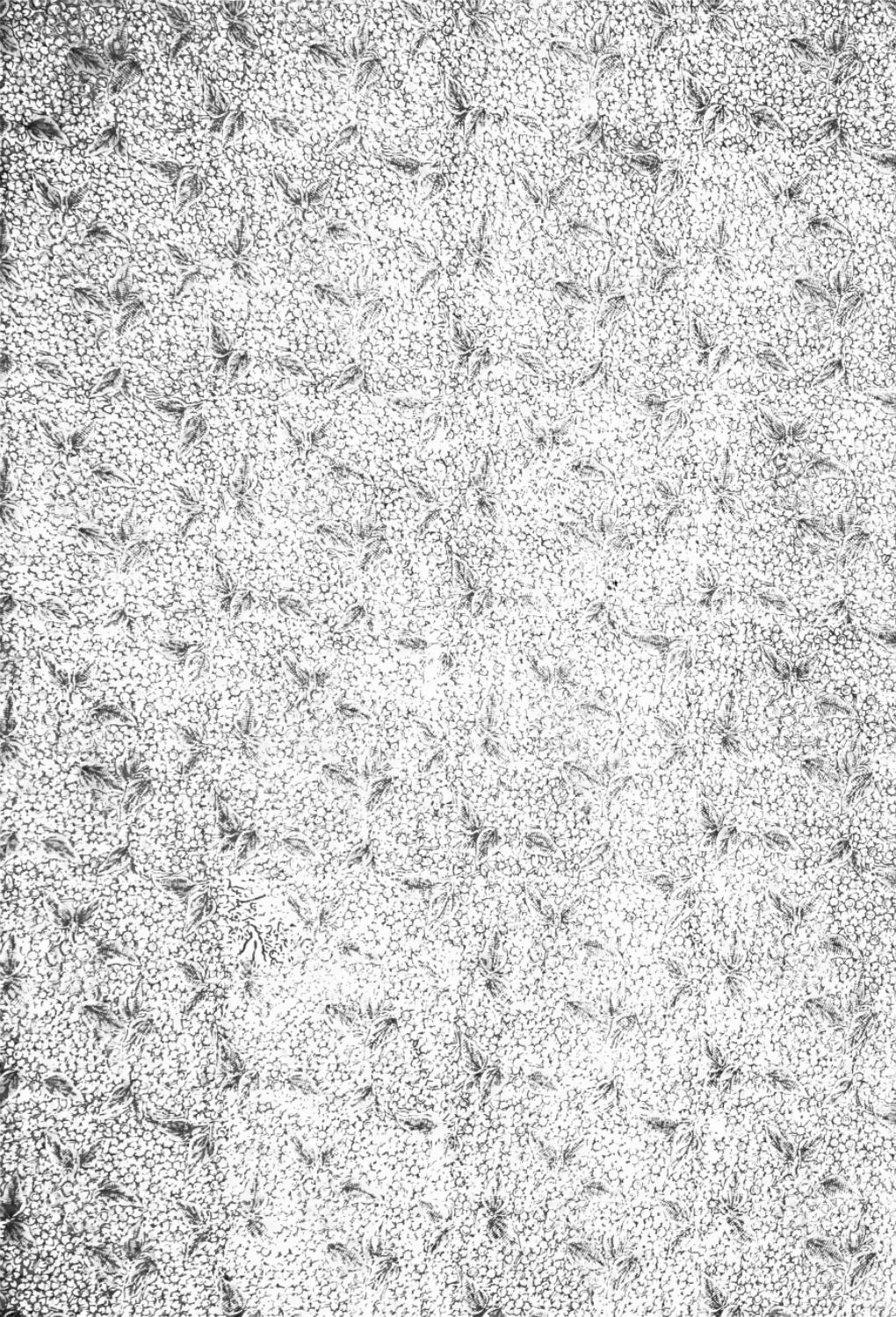
ST. CUTHBERT'S TOWER

FLORENCE WARDEN



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John Oliver Turnbull Esq^r

with the author's compliments

March, 1889.

ST. CUTHBERT'S TOWER.

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ST. CUTHBERT'S TOWER.

BY

FLORENCE WARDEN,

AUTHOR OF "THE HOUSE ON THE MARSH," ETC.

VOL. I.

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ST. CUTHBERT'S TOWER.

CHAPTER I.

A COLD WELCOME.

RISHTON HALL FARM was let at last. Lord Stannington had had it on his hands a long time, and had offered it at a lower and ever lower rent. It was an open secret that John Oldshaw, who had a long lease of Lower Rishton Farm at the other end of the village, had expected the Rishton Hall lease to drop into his hands at last for a very trifling rent indeed. He was a careful man ; the property under his hands throve ; and he was fond of saying that his lordship would make a better bargain by letting him have the land at £10 an acre than by letting another man have it at £15. However, Lord Stannington had apparently thought otherwise ; at any rate, when

a stranger appeared upon the scene and offered him a fair rent for the land without any haggling, they came to terms without delay, and John Oldshaw found that his hoped-for bargain had escaped him.

This West Riding farmer was not a nice person to deal with when he was disappointed. He drove over to Sheffield to the agent's office, and stamped into that gentleman's presence, his square heavy face purple with ill-suppressed rage.

"Na then, Mester Garrett, be pleased to tell mah if yond's true as Ah hear, that Rishton Hall Farm's let to a stranger?" he bellowed, thumping the table with his broad fist, and glaring at the agent with the unreasoning fierceness of an angry bull.

Mr. Garrett was a slight fair man, of uncertain age, whose light eyes were accustomed, by long practice, to read men pretty accurately.

"Quite true, Mr. Oldshaw," he answered, civilly, with imperturbable coolness. "It was let a fortnight ago; and the new tenant comes

in—let me see—" referring to his papers—"on the 16th ; this day week, in fact."

"And dost tha' knaw, Mester Garrett, that Ah've had ma mahnd set on Rishton Hall Farm for this twelve month and moore ?"

"How could we know it, Mr. Oldshaw, since the farm's been in the market more than twice that time, and we have never had any intimation from you of a wish for it ?"

"We Yarkshiremen doan't do things in a hurry. But every mon in t' village knawed Ah'd set ma heeart on t' farm, and noo Ah'm to be t' laughin'-stock o' a' t' feeals i' t' coontry, and Rishton Farm let ower ma yead to a stranger as nawbody's ever heerd on ! "

And the farmer gave an apoplectic snort of malignant anger.

"Oh, but that is not the case, Mr. Oldshaw," said the agent, as quietly as ever; "Mr. Denison, the gentleman who has taken the farm, is a friend of friends of his lordship, and in every way a tenant of the most desirable kind."

John Oldshaw calmed down suddenly, and

into his small blood-shot blue eyes there came a satisfied twinkle.

“A gentleman, d’ye say. A gentleman’s got t’ farm!” in a tone of the deepest contempt. “Thank ye, Mester Garret, Ah’m quite satisfied. It’s not for me to grumble at his lordship, then. Ah can pity him. The’ never was t’ gentleman born who could do any good at farming, and if a gentleman born’s got Rishton Hall Farm, all t’ ill I wish his lordship is—may t’ gentleman born stick to ’s bargain.”

And with these words, uttered in a tone of fierce triumph, the farmer, who had not removed his hat on entering the office, turned and stalked out with every appearance of enjoying, as he had intimated, a complete revenge.

The village of Rishton boasted two inns, both of the most unpretending kind. The larger and more important of these was the Chequers, a stone building of the simplest kind of architecture, to which were attached numerous small outbuildings, forming three sides of a quadrangle for Mr. Tew’s gig and Mrs. Tew’s

hens. The Chequers stood just outside the gate of Rishton Hall Farm, and its windows commanded the approach from Matherham, the nearest market town, which was three miles away. On the 16th of January, the day of the expected arrival of the new tenant of Rishton Hall, John Oldshaw took up his stand at one of the inn windows, watching with malevolent eyes for the approach of his rival. It was a bitterly cold day, grey overhead and black under foot; and the frost, which had held for three days, was growing harder as the afternoon wore on. John Oldshaw, with a sense of keen disappointment, had at last to acquiesce in the general belief that the new tenant would not come to-day.

“If he’s coom as far as Matherham he’ll stop there t’ night, Mester Oldshaw,” said Tew, the landlord, a small man, ruled by his wife. “T’ ground’s too slippy for e’er a horse to stand on, letting’ alone t’ road’s all hill and dale ’tween this and Matherham. Besides, t’ awd house is as bare as a barn ; he’d never coom till he’d sent

some stuff to put in it, and a coople o' servants to set it to rights a bit."

"Well, it aint ma way o' doin' things, to neame one day for coomin' and then to coom another," said Oldshaw, contemptuously. "But, then, Ah'm naw gentleman, and my lord Stannington 'll mighty soon wish as he could say seame o' t' new tenant, Mester Tew."

Mr. Tew could not afford to have an independent opinion in the presence of the great man of the village, with that miserable Cock and Bottle, not five hundred yards away, gaping for first place as the hostelry of the *élite*.

"It's ta mooch to expect to get another tenant like you, Mester Oldshaw," he said, discreetly.

It was by this time nearly four o'clock, and the grey dawn was already beginning to darken towards a black evening when Mat Oldshaw, the farmer's eldest son, who had been sent by his father to the top of the hill on the look-out, re-entered the inn at a pace somewhat faster than his usual shambling gait. He was a tall, round-

shouldered lad of about twenty, with fair hair and a weather-tanned face, whose heavy dulness was for the moment lightened by a passing gleam of great excitement.

“Weel, Mat, hast seean a ghost?” asked his father.

“Naw, feyther; but there’s a cab coomin’ down t’ hill——”

“So Mester Gentleman’s coom, has he?” shouted the farmer, triumphantly; and he had seized his stout ash stick, and was making with ponderous strides for the door, as if with the intention of inflicting bodily chastisement on the insolent new-comer, when his son interposed, blushing a deep brick-red to the roots of his hair.

“Eh, but feyther,” he stammered, turning the door handle uneasily, and dividing his glances between the floor, the window, and his father’s boorish face, “it’s na t’ gentleman; it’s nobbut two lasses.”

After which admission, he fell to blushing more violently than before.

"Two lasses?" echoed Oldshaw, incredulously.

"Hey, feyther. An' one o' them's got a feace lik' a rose."

"Feace lik' a rose?" thundered the farmer. "Don't thee daze tha dull wits lookin' at wenches' faces, for Ah tell tha Ah'll have na son o' mine hangin' aboot t' Hall noo."

"She bain't na lass for t' likes o' mea, feyther; yon lass is a leady," said the lad, simply.

If the stranger's fair face had not, as his father suggested, dazed his dull wits already, the young man would surely have had the tact to restrain these rash words, which fanned the flame of his father's coarse malevolence.

"A leady! A foine leady! ta foine fur any son o' mine? Ah tell thee, feeal, t' day 'll coom when tha foine leady 'll wish she wur good enough for t' loikes o' thee; and good enough she shall never be—tha heears?"

Though the young man's head was bent in a listening attitude, and he assented in the

meekest of gruff voices, the father guessed that this deep attention was not all for his discourse, when the sound of hoofs and wheels on the hard ground outside attracted him to the outer door, which he reached in time to see a luggage-laden cab slowly descend the hill and pass the inn-door, giving time for a look at the two young faces inside. Mistress and maid evidently; both bright, eager, and rather anxious. The former met full the surly stare of the farmer, and she drew back her head as if a blast of chilling wind had met her on her approach to her new home. The little maid, who had rosy cheeks and what one may call *retroussé* features, was less sensitive, and she looked out to resent this cold unwelcome with a contemptuous toss of the head.

“They’re reg’lar savages in these parts, Miss Olivia,” she said, in a slightly-raised tone. “I only hope we may be uneaten by the time the master comes !”

The cab had passed the front of the inn, and was rounding the sharp turn which led up a slight ascent through the open farmyard gate,

when suddenly, without any warning except a few rough jolts over the uneven ground, it turned over on its side, to the accompaniment of shrill screams from one female throat, and a less loud but more plaintive cry from the other. Mat Oldshaw, who was standing on the inn doorstep behind his father, made a spring forward to help them. But the elder man, with a movement quicker than one would have expected from his clumsy form and ponderous gait, grasped his arm with a violence which made the lad reel, and giving him a push back against the wall of the house, said, in a low, thick voice—

“ Doan’t thoo meddle with what doan’t concern thee. Wheer there’s so mooch cry, there aren’t mooch hurt, tak’ ma word for’t.”

“ Feyther ! ” said Mat, indignantly, entreatingly. Then he was dumb, for even through his not over-bright brains came a suspicion that this accident was perhaps not wholly unexpected by one of its witnesses.

As this brief scene passed between father and

son, a man in a short frieze coat, knickerbockers, gaiters, and deer-stalker cap, who had quickened his pace down the hill into a run on seeing the accident, looked full into the faces of both men with a keen, shrewd expression, as he dashed by.

“It’s parson Brander, o’ S’ Cuthbert’s, feyther. He heared thee,” said the young man in a husky, awed whisper.

“An’ wha not? Ah’d loike to see sik as him say a word to me!” said the farmer, in a loud voice of boastful contempt.

And the attitudes respectively of father and son, the one of contemptuous disgust, the other of awestruck respect, represented the two views most commonly taken in the country side of the Reverend Vernon Brander, vicar of Saint Cuthbert’s.

Before the last disdainful word was out of John Oldshaw’s mouth the new comer had opened the cab door, and extricated the two girls from their unpleasant position. The maid was uppermost, but she was a little creature, and had probably inflicted far less inconvenience on

her more massively built mistress than that young lady would have inflicted on her had their positions been reversed. Her rosy cheeks had lost their colour, and from her forehead, which had been cut by the broken glass of the carriage window, blood was trickling down.

In answer to the gentleman's inquiries as to whether she was hurt, she said in a trembling voice that she didn't know yet, and begged him to get her mistress out. This he at once proceeded to do, and was rewarded by the thanks of a young lady whom he at once decided to be one of the handsomest girls that this or any other country ever produced.

Olivia Denison was indeed an unchallenged beauty, and had occupied that proud position almost ever since, twenty years ago, she had been pronounced to be "a lovely baby." She was tall—of that cruel height which forces short admirers, on pain of looking ridiculous, to keep their distance; of figure rather massive than slender, with a fair skin, a fresh colour, dark hair, blue eyes, and a winning expression of

energy and honesty which gave to the whole face its greatest charm. For the moment, however, the rose colour had left her cheeks too, and her lips were drawn tightly together.

"You are hurt, I am afraid," said the stranger, with concern.

"I've only—pinched—my finger," she answered, trying to laugh.

But the effort of speaking brought the tears to her eyes, much to her indignation. For she was brave, and she liked to have the credit of it.

"Let me see," said he, with kindly authority.

She presented her right hand, from which he drew the glove very gently, disclosing bruised and slightly discoloured finger-tips.

"They do hurt a little, but it's nothing very dreadful. I don't know how I did it," she said.

"Lucky it's no worse," said the stranger, kindly. "Now for the lad."

The young driver was looking ruefully at the overturned vehicle. He proved to have escaped

with no worse damage than a battered hat. Lucy, the maid, who had ascertained that her head was still on her shoulders, had bound up her cut forehead with her handkerchief, and was scolding the driver for his carelessness as she pointed to the scattered luggage. The traces having broken as the cab fell, the horse had sustained very little hurt, so that, on the whole, the accident had been without tragic consequences. The rescuer took hold of the girl, and shook her by the arm.

“Now, don’t you think, considering all things, you might find some better use for your tongue than scolding? You might have been upset a mile away on the road, instead of which you are turned out comfortably at your own door. For, I suppose, you are coming to the Hall?”

“Yes, sir,” answered Lucy, abashed, but still rather mutinous, not having the least idea that she was speaking to a clergyman.

“So that the real sufferer by this spill is neither you nor your mistress, but the poor lad

who has driven you safely more than three miles over a very dangerously slippery road, and who will perhaps get discharged by his master for having injured the cab. Your mistress does not scold you for half an hour if you break a plate."

"Yes, she does, sir," fired up Lucy, so unexpectedly that Mr. Brander involuntarily glanced with surprise at the young lady. "Oh, not Miss Olivia," added the little maid almost indignantly; "it's Mrs. Denison I mean."

"Well, then, if you find the habit so unamiable in Mrs. Denison, as I see you do, you should take the greatest care not to fall into it yourself," said the vicar, suppressing a smile.

Then he turned again to the lady.

"Is everything ready for your coming?" he asked, doubtfully.

For he had passed the house that morning, and found it deserted, mildewed, and shuttered-up as usual.

"No, nothing," said the girl. "We've come on in advance to prepare things for papa and

mamma and the rest," she added rather tremulously.

The frightful immensity of the undertaking perhaps struck her now for the first time, as she stood, still shaking from the shock of the accident, staring at the smokeless chimneys and shuttered windows of the new home. Mr. Brander looked from one girl to the other, very sorry for both, wondering what kind of idiots the parents could be to send two inexperienced young lasses to grapple with all the difficulties of installation.

"And the furniture? I suppose that has come?" he suggested, dubiously.

"Oh, I hope so," said the girl, anxiously.

"I'll ask at the inn here. If it has come they will have seen it pass. And Mrs. Tew will give you both a cup of tea. You don't mind going into an inn, do you? It's a very respectable place."

"Oh no; of course we don't," said Miss Denison. "Indeed, it is very, very kind of you to take so much trouble for us."

"Trouble! Nonsense. It's a splendid excitement. As far as I am concerned I should like a pair of travellers overturned here once a week."

He beckoned to Lucy, and led them the few steps back to the inn door. John Oldshaw was still standing in a defiant attitude on the doorstep, whence he had watched the proceedings with malicious interest. His son was still peeping out, sheepish and ashamed, from behind him.

"Here, Mat, will you run round to Mrs. Wall's—tell her that Miss Denison has come, and ask for the key of the Hall," said he. "And then you might lend me a hand to take some of the lady's trunks into the house."

Mat's face brightened and flushed.

"All right, sir," he said, and tried to push past his father.

But the elder man blocked the doorway with his arms, and stood like a rock.

"Nay," he said, obstinately; "Mat doesn't stir at tha' bidding. Help t' wenches thasel'; thoo's used to 't."

Olivia drew back; she was shocked, frightened, by the dogged ferocity of the farmer's face, and by the sudden expression of some strong feeling—whether anger or anguish she could not quite tell—which for a moment convulsed the features of her unknown companion. As for Oldshaw's coarse words, the strong Yorkshire dialect rendered them unintelligible to her. They, however, roused the spirit of the phlegmatic Mat.

"For shame, feyther!" cried he, in a voice which was a new terror for the young lady, whose champion he thus declared himself to be. "Mester Brander, Ah'll go loike a reace horse."

And ducking his long body under his father's left arm with an unceremonious roughness which shook that mighty man from his dignity, he touched his cap to Olivia with oafish respect, and ran off down the lane past the Hall barns with the best speed of his long legs.

"We won't go in there, thank you very much," said Olivia, when Mr. Brander had

come back to the spot to which she had retreated. "I could not pass that man; I would rather not go near him."

"Will you wait here while I find out about the furniture, then?"

"Please promise not to quarrel with that horrid man about his rudeness to us. I can see he is one of those people who can't help being rude and horrid, just as some other people can't help being unselfish and kind," said the girl, shyly, but with much warmth. "Will you please promise?"

"Yes," said he, simply, looking into her face with a grave, straightforward expression of interest and, as it seemed to her, of gratitude, which surprised and touched her.

Then he turned without another word, almost as if afraid to say another word, and going back rapidly to the inn, passed the farmer, who sullenly made way for him, and disappeared into the house. When he came back his face was full of deep concern of a different kind.

"I bring bad news," he said to the girls,

who, mistress and maid, were shrinking together in their desolation. “I am afraid your furniture has not come, and—they say they haven’t a room to spare in the inn for to-night. But if Mrs. Tew could see you and speak to you herself——”

“I wouldn’t stay in the house,” burst out Olivia, indignantly. “If we can only get into the Hall, Lucy and I can manage very well indeed.”

“But the place is sure to be hideously damp, and there are no carpets; in fact, there’s nothing,” said Mr. Brander, in dismay.

“The resources of the feminine mind are infinite,” said Olivia, who was again blinking behind her veil. “Here comes the old woman who has the keys, I suppose. I shall get her to take us in for a little while—at least, she’ll have a cottage and a fire somewhere or other. And perhaps while we are waiting there the furniture will come.”

Mr. Brander looked at her with renewed compassion. He thought this last a forlorn hope.

"Don't be disappointed if it doesn't come yet," he said, encouragingly. "Old Sarah Wall will do her best for you, I'm sure, and all the better if she doesn't see me talking to you. For you won't hear any good of me from her."

And before Olivia could detain him to pour out again the thanks for his kindness with which her heart was overflowing, he had raised his hat with a sudden cold withdrawal into himself, and turning with the rapidity of the most accomplished athlete, disappeared along the road which led through Lower Rishton, leaving her overwhelmed with surprise at the abrupt change in his manner, and with desolation at this unexpectedly sudden loss of their only friend.

CHAPTER II.

A HAUNTED ROOM.

OLD Sarah Wall, the key-bearer, who now came ambling up at a very slow pace, holding her hand to her side, and muttering feebly as she moved, was a poor exchange, Olivia thought, for the masculine friend who had ended his kindly services so abruptly. He had not even waited, as he had intimated an intention of doing, to see the luggage safely moved into the house. Mrs. Wall looked very cross, and not too clean. Scarcely deigning to glance at the strangers, she muttered, “This way!” and then fell to groaning as she led the way through the farm-yard up to the house.

Olivia paused to look despairingly at her scattered trunks, and to give a kindly word of comfort to the unlucky cab-driver, who was still occupied in estimating the damage done to his vehicle, and his chances of getting it back to

Matherham that night. As she did so she heard a footstep on the hard ground beside her, and found the shamefaced and blushing Mat at her side.

"Ah'll get t' luggage in all reight, never fear," said he, in a voice so gruff with excessive bashfulness that poor Olivia thought him surly, and shrank back with a cold refusal of his services rising to her lips.

Mat thought she identified him with his father, and so hastened to offer a neat apology for that gentleman's conduct.

"Feyther's a pig," said he. "Boot he wunna harm ye; an' Ah'll do what Ah can to mak' oop for him being so rough."

And he shouldered one trunk and caught up another, and strode along towards the house, whistling to himself with the defiant carelessness of one who feels he has done a bold stroke. The lady and her attendant followed, somewhat soothed by this little show of friendliness.

Even in the midst of her feelings of desolation and disappointment, in spite of the keen

cold and of the forlorn, blind look which shuttered and shut-up windows, broken chimney-pots, and untrimmed ivy, gave to the house, Olivia could not look quite without admiration and a youthful sense of delight in the picturesque at the old Hall. The body of the house was a long, plain, two-storeyed building, with a flagged roof and a curious wide, flat portico, supported by two spindleshank wooden pillars, beneath which three stone steps, deeply hollowed out and worn by generations of feet, led to the front door. At the west end a gabled wing, flag-roofed like the rest, ran back from the body of the house ; and at right angles to this there jutted out westwards a second small wing of the same shape. In these, the oldest portions of the house, traces of former architectural beauties remained in stately Tudor chimneys and two mul-lioned windows, round which the ivy clustered in huge bushes, long left neglected and untrimmed. At this end of the building a little garden ran underneath the walls, protected from the incursions of intrusive cows by a wall which

began towards the back of the house by being very high, and ended towards the front by being very low. From the wall to the house the garden had been shut in by palings and a little gate; but these were now much broken and decayed, and afforded small protection to the yews and holly-bushes, the little leafless barberry tree, and the shabby straggling evergreens, which grew thickly against the weather-stained walls of the old house, choking the broken panes of the lower windows as the ivy did those of the upper ones. It was this western end that was visible from the road, the view of the front being obscured by a long stone-built barn, very old, and erected on foundations older still, about which hung traditions of monkish days.

If she had seen it at any other time, Olivia would have been crazy with delight at the thought of living in such a place; and even now, cheerless as the immediate prospect was, it gave her a gleam of comfort to reflect that, if she did have to pass the night without any bed amongst the rats, the ancestors of those rats had

scampered over the place in the time of Queen Elizabeth.

With some difficulty, Mrs. Wall turned the key in the rusty lock and admitted them. It seemed that she had a grievance in the fact that she had not known on what day they were to arrive. As a matter of fact, she was one of those persons who are never prepared for anything, but Olivia had had no means of learning her peculiarities, and so she met the old woman's complaints in a humble and apologetic spirit which increased Mrs. Wall's arrogance.

The entrance hall was low-roofed and square ; the walls were covered with a cheap and commonplace paper, the wainscoting and the banisters of the broad staircase were of painted wood. This was the portion of the house which had suffered most during its decadence. Olivia, examining everything with an eye keen to discover the good points to be made the most of in her new home, found that where the paint had worn off the staircase and wainscot dark oak was revealed underneath, and she rashly uttered an

exclamation of horror at the vandalism of the farm's occupants.

"The idea of spoiling beautiful dark oak with this horrid paint! Why, the people who did it ought to be sent to penal servitude!"

Mrs. Wall was scandalised.

"T' foaks as lived here last liked t' place clean," she said, severely. "It'll nivver look t' same again as it did, wi' a clean white antimacassar stitched on to ivery chair, an' wax flowers under glass shades in a' t' parlour winders. An' t' parlour allus as neeat as a new pin, so ye wur afreaid a'most to coom into 't. Ah, ye meen talk o' yer gentlefoak, but they'll nivver mak' it look t' same again!"

Olivia had opened the door to the right, and throwing wide the shutters of one of the three large windows, revealed a long, low-ceilinged room, used as the living-room by the late farmer's family, and having at the further end a wide, high, old-fashioned fireplace, the mouldings of which had been carefully covered with whitewash, now smoke-begrimed and worn into

dark streaks. The shutters and the wainscoting, which in this room was breast high upon the walls, had been treated in the same way. Olivia uttered a groan, and turned to the door, afraid of uttering more offensive remarks. Then they went up-stairs, and opened the doors of a lot of little meanly-papered bed-rooms which formed the upper storey of this part of the house. Having allowed the new-comers to examine these, while she remained sniffing in the passage, Mrs. Wall shuffled hastily back to the staircase.

“Stop!” cried Olivia, as the old woman placed one downtrodden shoe on the second step; “we haven’t seen the other part of the house at all. Where does this lead to?”

And she peered into a crooked passage which led into the first of the two older wings.

Mrs. Wall paused with evident reluctance.

“There’s nowt yonder but t’ worst o’ t’ bed-rooms; ye’ve seen t’ best,” she grumbled.

But Olivia was already exploring, followed by Lucy; and the old woman, with much

reluctance, brought up the rear. The passage was quite dark, and very cold. The tallow tip which Mrs. Wall carried gave only just enough light to enable the explorers to find the handles of the doors on the left. One of these Olivia opened, not without difficulty ; for the floor was strewn with lumber of all sorts, which the last occupier of the farm had not thought worth carrying away. The walls of this room, which was very small, were panelled right up to the low ceiling ; and the panelling had been whitewashed. A second chamber in this passage was in a similar condition, except that the panelling had been torn down from two of the four walls, and its place supplied by a layer of plaster. Holding up her skirts very carefully, Olivia stepped across the dusty piles of broken boxes, damaged fireirons, and odds and ends of torn carpet with which the floor of this room also was covered, and looked through the dusty panes of the little window.

“Now you’ve seen a’,” said Mrs. Wall, rather querulously. “An’ t’ lad downstairs

'll be wanting to know wheer to put t' things."

She was retreating with her candle, when Olivia stopped her again.

"No," she said eagerly, "we've not seen all. There's a wing of the house we have not been into at all; and I can see through the little window, on this side of it, some curtains and a flower vase with something still in it. It doesn't look empty and deserted like the rest. I must get in there before I go down."

But Mrs. Wall's old face had wrinkled up with superstitious terror, and it was only by force of muscle that the young girl succeeded in cutting off her retreat.

"Na'," she said, her voice sinking to a croaking whisper. "I canna' tak' ye in theer. An'—an' t' doors are locked, ye see," she added, eagerly, as Olivia, still grasping her conductress's arm, in vain tried the door at the end of the passage, and one on the left-hand side at right-angles with it.

"Well, but why are they locked?" asked the young girl impatiently, her rich-toned, youthful voice ringing sonorously through the long-disused passage. "The whole place is ours now, and I have a right to see into every corner of it."

"Oh, Miss Olivia, perhaps we'd better go back—go downstairs—for to-day," suggested the little maid Lucy, rather timorously, behind her.

Mrs. Wall's nervous tremors were beginning to infect the poor girl, who was, moreover, very cold, and longing for some tea. But her young mistress had at least her fair share of an immovable British obstinacy. Finding that both doors were firmly locked and that there was no key to either forthcoming, she flung the whole weight of her massive and muscular young body against the door on the left, until the old wood cracked and the rusty nails rattled in the disused hinges.

"Mercy on us!" exclaimed Sarah Wall, petrified by the audacity of the young Amazon. "Shoo 'll have t' owd place aboot our ears!"

"Take the candle, Lucy," said Olivia, imperiously, perceiving that the dip was flaring and wobbling in an ominous manner in the old woman's trembling fingers.

Lucy obeyed, frightened, but curious. Her mistress made two more vigorous onslaughts upon the door; the first produced a great creaking and straining; at the second the door gave way on its upper hinge, so that the girl's strong hands were able to force the lock with ease. She turned to the guide in some triumph.

"Now, Mrs. Wall, we'll unearth your ghost, if there is one. At any rate, we'll get to the bottom of your mystery in five minutes."

But she did not. Pressing on to the end of a very narrow, unlighted passage in which she now found herself, Olivia came to a second door; this opened easily and admitted her into a large chamber, the aspect of which, dimly seen by the fading light which came through a small square window on her left, filled her brave young spirit with a sudden sense of dreariness and desolation.

For it was not empty and lumber-strewn, like the rest of the rooms she had entered. The dark forms of cumbrous, old-fashioned furniture were discernible in the dusk; the heavy hangings of a huge four-post mahogany bedstead shook, as a rat, disturbed by the unwonted intrusion, slid down the curtain and scurried across the floor. As she stepped slowly forward on the carpet, which was damp to the tread, and peered to right and left in the gloom, Olivia could see strange relics of the room's last occupant; the withered remains of what had been a bunch of flowers on a table in front of the little window; an assortment of Christmas cards and valentines, all of design now out of date, and all thickly covered with brown dust, fastened with pins on to the wall on each side of the high mantelpiece; even a book, a railway novel, with its yellow boards gnawed by the rats, which she picked up rather timorously from the floor, where, by this time, it seemed to have acquired a consecrated right to lie.

Still advancing very slowly, Olivia reached

the opposite side of the room, where her quick eyes had perceived the barred shutters of a second and much larger window. With some difficulty she removed the bar, which had grown stiff and rusty, and, drawing back the heavy shutters, revealed the long, stone-mullioned window, with diamond panes, which had been such a picturesque feature of the house from the outside. The thick, untrained ivy obscured one end of it, but enough light glimmered through the dirt-encrusted panes for Olivia to be now quite sure of two things of which she felt nearly sure before—namely, that this was the best bedroom in the house, and that, for some mysterious reason, this chamber, instead of being dismantled like the rest, had been allowed to remain for a period of years almost as its last occupant had left it. Almost, but not quite; for the bedding had been removed, the covers to the dressing-table and the gigantic chest of drawers, and the white curtains which had once hung before the shuttered window.

On the other hand, a host of knicknacks

remained to testify to the sex, the approximate age, and the measure of refinement of the late owner. More railway novels, all well worn ; flower vases of an inexpensive kind ; two hand-mirrors, one broken ; a dream book ; a bow of bright ribbon ; a handsome cut-glass scent-bottle ; these things, among others, were as suggestive as a photograph ; while the fact that this room alone had been studiously left in its original state, and even furnished in accordance with it, threw a new and more favourable light on the taste of that mysteriously interesting somebody whose individuality made itself felt across a lapse of years to the wondering newcomer.

Olivia Denison was not by any means a fanciful girl. She had been brought up by a stepmother—a mode of education little likely to produce an unwholesome forcing of the sentimental tendencies. She was, besides, too athletic and vigorously healthy to be prone to superstitious or morbid imaginings. But as she stood straining her eyes in the fading daylight to take

in every detail of the mysterious room, the panelling, which in this apartment alone was left its own dark colour, seemed to take strange moving patterns as she looked; the musty, close air seemed to choke her; and faint creakings and moanings, either in the ancient wood-work or the loose-hanging ivy outside, grew in her listening ears to a murmur as of a voice trying to speak, and miserably failing to make itself understood. She was roused by a shrill cry, and found Lucy, whose fear for her mistress had overcome her fear of this desolate room, shaking her by the arm, and pulling her towards the door.

“Oh, Miss Olivia, do come out—do come out! You’re going to faint; I’m sure you are. It’s all this horrid room—this horrid house. Oh, do come, and write and tell master it’s not a fit place for Christians to come to, and he’d never prosper if he was to come here, and nor wouldn’t none of us, I’m positive. Do come, Miss Olivia, there’s a dear. It’s fit to choke one in here, what with the rats and the damp, that it is.

And if we was to stay here long enough we'd see ghosts, I know."

Olivia laughed. No phantom had terrors for her, however strong an impression half-guessed realities might make upon her youthful imagination.

"Don't be afraid, Lucy," she said, encouragingly. "We'll soon frighten the ghosts away by letting a little fresh air into these musty rooms. Here, help me."

Half reassured by her resonant voice, the maid accompanied her to the larger window, still clinging to her arm, but more for companionship than with the idea of affording support to her mistress, who had recovered her self-command. Together they succeeded in throwing open both windows to their full extent, not, however, accomplishing this without a shriek from Lucy as a great bird flew out of the hanging ivy and almost flapped against their faces in his confusion at this unusual disturbance. They both felt a sense of relief as the keen but fresh outside air blew into the long-

closed room, dispersing the mouldy, musty smell of damp hangings and decaying wood. Even the old woman, who had stood all this time in the doorway, apparently engaged in muttering incantations over the tallow dip, but really transfixed by this audacity of young blood, drew a long breath as the rush of fresh air reached her, and gathered courage to ask “what they were after doin’ now.”

“We’re ‘after’ ransacking every corner of this old ghost run, turning it upside down and inside out, and chasing away the last shadow of a bogey,” answered Olivia, cheerily. “Here’s another room to look into.”

Crossing the room with a light step, she opened the door of the second of the closed-up apartments. This chamber also had escaped the dismantling of the rest of the house, but it contained very little that would have been worth taking away. It was lighted by three small windows, all much broken, and all hung with limp rags which had once been muslin curtains, gaily tied up with blue ribbons, which were now

almost colourless with dust and damp. The floor was covered with matting, which smelt like damp straw, and had evidently afforded many a meal to the rats now scurrying behind the wood-work, which in this room was much decayed and in far from good repair. A plain deal table, from which the cover had been removed; two limp wicker chairs with ragged cushions; an empty birde cage; a fanciful wicker kennel for a lapdog; these were nearly all that was left of the furniture.

Olivia inspected everything with eager but silent interest, and then turned suddenly to Sarah Wall, who had again followed them as far as the door, preferring even the eerie passage of the bedroom to solitude outside.

“Who lived in these rooms last?” she asked.

But the candle nearly fell from Mrs. Wall’s hand as, for all answer, she withdrew into the desolation of the deserted bedroom, rather than face the eager questioner again.

Olivia was not to be put off so easily. She followed precipitately, and, changing the form of her attack, said—

“How long is it since these rooms were shut up, Mrs. Wall?”

The guide’s eyes shifted about, refusing to meet those of the young girl.

“Two year; same as rest o’ t’ house,” she answered, in a grumbling tone.

“Only two years? It wasn’t shut up long before the family went away, then?” said Olivia, incredulously.

“Not as Ah knaws on,” answered Sarah Wall.

Miss Denison hated an untruth with the impetuous loathing of an honest nature. She would have liked to shake this wretched old woman, who would not be candid on a subject which could not be of the slightest importance to her.

Perhaps her companion got an inkling of this information, for she turned and beat a hasty retreat along the narrow passage which led

from the bedroom to the body of the house. Olivia did not at once follow her. With a curious reluctance, whether reverence for a dead past whose relics she was disturbing, or fear of some shock which its revelations might bring her, she scarcely knew, the girl picked up one of the dust-begrimed novels, and looked at the title-page. But there was nothing written on it. She opened three or four more of the novels with the same result. By this time it was growing so dark that she had to hasten her movements for fear that when at last a clue was found she might be unable to distinguish the letters. Having in vain examined every book upon the table, she continued to explore until she found, on a small hanging bookshelf in an obscure corner of the room, a little pile of devotional works — Bible, hymn book, Bogatsky's "Golden Treasury," a tiny "Daily Portion," and a prayer-book. This last was on the top of all. As Olivia opened it, there fell to the floor tiny dried scraps of flowers and fern. Turning to the flyleaf, and carrying the book in haste to

the window, she found these words, written in a round schoolboy's hand—

"Ellen Mitchell, from her affectionate brother Ned." And a date of eighteen years back.

Olivia replaced the prayer-book on the shelf, and left the old room without further delay, followed by Lucy, who had remained close at hand, but discreetly silent, during these investigations.

When they reached the outer end of the passage, Olivia glanced with some curiosity at the old door she had so roughly broken down, and as she did so, some letters, written in pencil high on the upper panel caught her eye. With difficulty she made out a date in July ten years before.

"I wonder," she thought, "whether that is the date on which the rooms were locked up. If so, it was eight years before the last people left the house, I know. And their name was Mitchell. Who can I ask to tell me the story?"

And, having forgotten cold, fatigue, and hunger in the interest of her discoveries, Olivia Denison made her way slowly down to the ground-floor again, where she caught Mrs. Wall in the act of slipping out at the front door.

CHAPTER III.

A MYSTERIOUS FRIEND.

THE estimable Sarah Wall was, as she herself would have said, “not in the best of tempers” at being intercepted in her proposed flight.

“Ah thowt ye’d got all ye wanted,” she grumbled, as Olivia Denison followed her out on to the doorstep and asked her where she was going. “Ah wur goin’ whoam to get a coop o’ tea, for Ah’m fair clemmed.”

“You thought we’d got all we wanted!” said Olivia, ironically. “Why, we’ve got nothing at all—not even a chair to sit on. I think, if you have tea going at your cottage, you might ask us to come and have some.”

“Hey, that ye might, Sally,” said a gruff voice, which Olivia had now learnt to recognise as that of a friend.

Turning, she saw Mat Oldshaw, his blushes, if he was still blushing, invisible in the darkness,

standing at the foot of the steps, mounting guard over the luggage, which he had piled together.

"Oh," cried the girl, with a sudden change to melting gratitude, "you haven't been waiting out here in the cold all this time for us, have you?"

"Weel, miss," said Mat, laughing uneasily, and shifting from one heavy foot to the other, "door was shut, an' Ah couldn't get in."

And, to put an end to conversation, which was an art in which he felt he did not shine, the young fellow seized the two smallest trunks and carried them straight into the big farm living-room, whistling a lively tune as he did so. Olivia stood back quite silently while he fetched in the rest of the luggage in the same way, and then stood looking at it dubiously by the light of Mrs. Wall's candle.

"It bean't naw good onfastenin' t' cords," he said at last, "for they won't stey in here. An' Ah dunno reightly what to be doin' for ye if yer goods bean't coom."

He went back again to the front door and looked out. Not that he could see anything of the road, for the huge barn opposite completely blocked the view from this point. But he was a good deal affected by the predicament in which this beautiful lady and her attendant found themselves, and he was shy of meeting the lady's eyes, being without means of comforting her. Suddenly a figure darted out from the gloom under the barn walls, a strong hand was laid upon the lad's arm, and, willy-nilly, he was dragged down the steps and heartily cuffed before he had recovered from his first surprise.

"Eh, feyther, what art doin' now?" he asked, as soon as he had recovered breath, having speedily recognised the touch of his parent's loving hand.

"Eh, thou feaul, thoo teastrill; Ah've got tha! Ah knew'd wheer thoo'd got to. This cooms o' followin' fowk wha can't keep off t' lasses. Coom whoam; coom tha whoam, and if ivver Ah catch tha again a-slitherin' aboot yon house, Ah'll turn thee oot o' ma house and oot

o' ma farm, as if ye wur nobbut a ploughboy,
that Ah will!"

Mat wriggled and writhed till he got loose from his father's grasp, and slinking back a step or two, he called out, not loudly or defiantly, but with the same rough kindness which he had shown from the first towards the friendless girls—

"Now mind, Sally, thou maun mash t' best coop o' tea thoo can for t' leddies."

John Oldshaw turned round at these words, and addressed the old woman in a thick and angry voice.

"Sarah Wall, get back to tha whoam an' tha own business. An' if thoo canna keep tha owd fingers oot o' other fowks' affairs, tha needna coom up our way o' Soondays for t' broken meat. So now thoo knaws."

And, with a jerk of the head to his son to intimate that Mat could go on in front and he would follow, the farmer stamped slowly and heavily away down the yard.

His coarse unkindness affected the three

women differently. Little Lucy began to whimper and to sob out indignant maledictions upon "the ol-ol-old brute ;" Mrs. Wall, after dropping half-a-dozen frightened curtseys, manifested a great eagerness to go ; Olivia drew herself up and became very stern and grave.

" You need not mind what that man says, Mrs. Wall," she said, in a firm, quiet voice. " You may be very sure that any kindness you do us will be amply repaid. And as for the broken meat he talks about, if you will really lose that by letting us rest a little while in your cottage and giving us a cup of tea, I can promise you a good dinner every Sunday while my father lives here."

But Mrs. Wall was far too timorous and cautious a person to risk the substantial reality of broken meat on Sundays from the great man of the village for the flimsy vision of a good dinner from a total stranger. She thrust her flickering tallow candle into Lucy's hands, and began to tie her wispy bonnet-strings with a resolute air.

"I'll leave t' candle," she said, as if making a great and generous concession ; "an' that's a' I can do for ye. For I've nowt in my place I could set afore a leddy ; an' as for tea, the bit fire I left will be out by this time."

"But I can light your fire again for you, and boil your kettle in two twos," burst in Lucy. "And we've brought some tea with us."

Her young mistress put a light hand on her arm.

"Never mind, Lucy," she said, quietly. "If Mrs. Wall doesn't care for us to go to her cottage we will not trouble her."

As she spoke, her eyes brightened, for at the end of the long barn she descried in the dusk the figure of the gentleman who had come to their aid that afternoon and then left them with such unaccountable suddenness. Lucy saw him too, and being more demonstrative than her mistress, she gave vent to her delight in words.

"No, Mrs. Wall, ma'am ; you needn't go for to put yourself out, for there's better folks than you coming along, that are a deal more obliging

than ever you'd be, and that have some Christian kindness in them, which is more than can be said for you. Ugh, you grumpy old woman, you!"

"Hush, Lucy," said her mistress in gentle rebuke; "the gentleman will hear you. And I don't suppose he's coming here at all," she added, reluctantly, as the figure they had both so quickly recognised disappeared again in the gloom.

"What gentleman? What gentleman?" asked the old woman, shrilly.

"How should we know, when we're strangers here?" retorted Lucy, who, now that her tongue was once loosened, was delighted to have what she afterwards called "a go-in" at their disobliging guide. "But he was a real gentleman; not like your pig-faced friend in the corduroy trousers that you're so mighty civil to; and he wears knickerbockers and gaiters and a cap over his eyes, if that's anything you can tell him by."

Apparently it was, for Sarah gave a step

back in horror, and ejaculated “Mercy on us!” two or three times, as if too much shocked for further speech.

“What’s the matter?” asked Olivia, rather sharply, remembering the stranger’s warning that she would hear no good of him from Sarah Wall, and curious to learn the reason. “If you know who the gentleman is, tell me his name. And what do you know against him?” she added, indiscreetly.

Mrs. Wall, though not brilliantly intelligent, had the splendid gift of reticence where she thought that things might “go round.” She only shook her head, therefore, and muttered something about getting herself into trouble and desiring to be allowed to go home.

“Well, just tell me first who he is, then, and you shall go at once,” said Olivia, persuasively.

The old woman, writhing nervously under the clasp of Miss Denison’s hand, evidently cast about in her mind for a means of getting free while committing herself as little as possible.

The reluctant words which at last came out were not very well chosen, however.

“I’ll tell ye this, then,” she croaked, in a broken whisper, peering round with her sunken eyes as if to be sure the treasonable communication she was making was not overheard by the person concerned. “Yon gentleman, as ye call him, is no fit company for young ladies. And others have found it oot to their cost—so fowk say,” she added, hastily. Then, as Olivia released her arm and she tottered away over the hard ground, she looked back to add, in a querulous and anxious tone, “But doan’t ye tak’ it frae me, mind. I nobbut told ye what I’ve heerd say.”

Olivia turned back towards the open door of the dreary house, feeling beyond measure miserable and disconsolate. The dimly seen figure of her friend of the afternoon had disappeared ; the disobliging old woman who was at least a fellow-creature, was rapidly hobbling out of sight ; while the words which had just, with so much difficulty, been forced out of her, seemed in the hag’s mouth to have acquired the chilling

significance of a curse. Lucy felt this too, for coming closer to her mistress she half whispered :

“ Oh, Miss Olivia, if there was really such things as witches, I should believe that old crone was one.”

“ Nonsense ! Come inside, and let us see what’s to be done.”

“ Oh, you’re not going in again—all by ourselves ! Oh, miss, just think of that upstairs room ! ” wailed the poor girl.

“ Now, look here, Lucy, you mustn’t be ridiculous. We’re in a dreadful plight, and we’ve got to make the best of it. If you give way to silly fancies instead of doing your best to help me, I shall have to take you to that inn at the corner and leave you there while I come back and shift for myself as best I can.”

Lucy, who loved her young mistress, grew sober and good immediately.

“ You know I’ll do what I can, Miss Olivia,” she said, suppressing a sob of alarm as a dull sound, apparently from the barn opposite, reached their ears.

Olivia listened. The sound was repeated.

"It sounds like some person chopping wood," she said, after a moment's pause. "I daresay, now the place is uninhabited, the villagers take what liberties they like with it, and use the barns and sheds to store their own wood and hay and things in. Now, come in, and let us undo some of the trunks before the candle goes out."

With most reluctant feet, but without another word of remonstrance, Lucy followed her young mistress. Olivia, with resolute steps and a mouth set with an expression which said to the phantoms of the old house, "Come on if you dare!" re-entered the hall, and, kneeling down before a trunk which had been placed there, attacked the cord round it with inexpert but strong fingers. They had got it open, and were congratulating themselves that in this, the first trunk unpacked, were candles, tea, and a little spirit lamp, when, suddenly, there fell upon their ears a noise which even to the brave-spirited Olivia was, in a lonely, empty house, undeniably

alarming. It came from the long living-room where most of their luggage lay, and was as of some heavy body falling with a crash on to the floor.

Olivia sprang to her feet.

"I opened one of the windows," she said, "and forgot to shut it. Some one has got in! No, don't scream!"

She clapped her hand on Lucy's mouth and reduced the threatened shriek to a moan; then, the noise having by this time ceased, she turned, heedless of the maid's whispered supplications, to the door of the long room. The lock was stiff with rust, and the handle difficult to turn; so that, perhaps not much against her will, she left the intruder, if intruder it was, time to escape. But there was no fresh sound, and the young girl's brave heart fluttered a little with the fear that perhaps, on opening the door, she would come face to face with a defiant marauder. At last the door opened. It was dark by this time; through the opened shutters of the four windows came only just enough light to show

that the trunks, piled up on the bare floor, had at least not been removed. The air blew in, very keen and cold, through the one open window, which was at the other end of the room, nearest to the fireplace."

"Is anybody there?" asked Olivia, scarcely without a tremor.

Her voice echoed without reply in the desolate apartment.

She held up the candle and advanced slowly, examining every gloomy corner. No one was there; no trace of any one having been there until, as she reached the other end, her glance fell on some dark object lying close under the open window. At this sight Lucy could not suppress the long-stifled scream, and it was not until her mistress, pouncing down upon the mysterious thing, revealed the fact that it was only a couple of logs and a bundle of sticks, neatly tied together with a piece of string, that she found enough relief from terror to burst into tears.

"Who's the benevolent burglar, I wonder?"

cried Olivia, her spirits rising instantly at the discovery of the little anonymous act of kindness.

She ran to the window and looked out. There was no one to be seen ; but on the window-ledge lay a box of cigar-lights.

“ The mysterious stranger again ! ” she said to herself. Then turning to the maid, said, “ Now, Lucy, make a fire as fast as you can. There are some newspapers with the rugs. Here are sticks and logs and matches. We shall feel different creatures when we are once warm.”

She shut down the window and boiled some water with her little spirit lamp ; while Lucy, with cunning hands, made in the huge rusty grate a fire which was soon roaring up the chimney, and pouring its bright warm light on floor and wall and ceiling. The spirits both of mistress and maid began to rise a little as they drew up one of the smaller trunks to the fire, and made a frugal meal of biscuits and milkless tea.

“ It is a horrid place, though, Miss Olivia,” said Lucy, who had been chilled to the heart by

Sarah Wall's utterances, and did not feel wholly sure that she herself had not been bewitched by that uncanny person.

"Oh, I suppose it might have been worse. They might have thrown bricks at us," said her mistress; "and remember that two people have already been very kind to us."

"Perhaps the young farmer-man only took to us just out of aggravation because his father didn't," suggested Lucy, who was a well-brought-up girl, and affected to take cynical views of young men. "And as for the gentleman, why, the old woman as good as said decent folk had better have nothing to do with him."

"But you surely wouldn't take that miserable old woman's word for it?"

"No, but I'd take his own face, miss. I watched him when the old farmer was going on so; and, my gracious! I never see such a black look on any one's face before. He seemed to grow all dark and purple-looking, and his eyes were quite red-like. It was just like as if he'd

have knocked the other man down, miss, that it was."

" Well, I don't think I should have thought any the worse of him if he had."

" Oh, miss, it's an evil face. And I'm never deceived about faces. I said, first time I saw her, that nursery-maid Mrs. Denison sent away without a character was no good. And then that under-gardener——"

" You mustn't let your prejudices run away with you. Judge people by their actions, not their looks. Now, I saw something quite different in that gentleman's face, and we can't both be right. It seemed to me that he looked like a man who had had a very hard life and a great deal of trouble; as if he had done nothing but struggle, struggle with—I don't know exactly with what; poverty, perhaps, or perhaps with a violent temper, or——"

She stopped and stared into the fire, having ceased to remember that she was carrying on a conversation. Her wandering thoughts, however, soon took a practical turn again. " The

cabman!" she cried, starting up tragically: "I never paid him."

She was instinctively turning towards the door, haunted by an alarming sum in addition of innumerable hours at sixpence every quarter of an hour, when Lucy's voice, in tones of great shrewdness, stopped her.

"Oh, Miss Olivia," she said, shaking her head knowingly; "he's gone away long ago. If this was a place where cabmen would wait for their fares for two hours without so much as knocking at the door we might think ourselves in heaven, which the other people shows us we're not."

"Well, but who paid his fare, then?"

Lucy began to look not only mysterious, but rather alarmed.

"Oh, Miss Olivia, perhaps it's a plot to get us into his power."

They had both come to the same conclusion as to the person who paid the fare, but at this point their reflections branched off into widely different channels.

" You're a little goose, Lucy, and you've been filling your head with penny novels, I can see," said she.

But the obligation to a stranger, which she could scarcely doubt she was under, troubled her.

" It is very, very awkward to be thrown out like this in a strange place with nobody to go to for help or advice," she began ; when suddenly a light came into her face, and she sprang up and ran to fetch her travelling-bag. " I'd forgotten all about it ! " she cried, as she drew out a closed letter directed in an old-fashioned, pointed, feminine hand to " Mrs. Brander, the Vicarage, Rishton." " The wife of one of the curates at Streatham knows the wife of the vicar here, and gave me a letter of introduction to her. I will go and call upon her at once. If she is the least nice she will help us, and tell us how to treat with these savages."

Olivia was fastening her mantle, which she had not taken off, and putting on her gloves. Lucy's round face had grown very long.

"And must I stay here, miss, all by myself?" she asked, dolefully.

Olivia looked at her dubiously.

"I would rather you stayed here, certainly, because, you see, the furniture might come while we were away," she said at last. "On the other hand, if you are going to frighten yourself into a fit at the scraping of every mouse——"

Lucy drew herself up. She was not really a coward, and this speech put her upon her mettle.

"I'll stay, Miss Olivia," she said, resolutely; adding, in a milder voice, "You won't be very long, will you?"

"Indeed I won't," answered her mistress, promptly. "I don't suppose it takes more than five minutes to go from one end of the village to the other. We saw the church from the cab windows; it's on the top of the hill. I shall make for that; the Vicarage is sure not to be far off."

Without more delay Olivia left the house, taking the way to the right by which they had approached it, in the hope of meeting some one

belonging to the inn who would direct her. She was fortunate enough to come upon a diminutive villager, who, after lengthy interrogation and apparent ignorance as to where "the Vicarage" was, acknowledged to knowing "where the parson lived."

"Will you take me to the house if I give you twopence?"

"Hey," replied the small boy, promptly.

He did not start, however, until he had taken an exhaustive survey of her, either for identification in case she should try to elude him at the other end of the journey, or to satisfy himself whether she was a person likely to possess twopence.

"Theer's two ways," he said, at last. "Short way over t' brook, an' oop t' steps and through t' churchyard; long way by t' road an' oop t' hill."

"Go the short way, then."

"Mr. Midgley, t' carpenter, fell an' broak his leg goin' oop theer this afternoon. An' t' churchyard geate's cloased by now."

" Well, then, we'll go the other way, of course."

The boy trudged along up the road, which was a continuation of that by which they had come to the farm, and made no attempt at conversation except in answer to Olivia's questions. She made out, after much persevering pumping, that the vicar, Mr. Brander, was much liked, and that his wife was only a little less popular. After this there was a pause, which was broken by the boy, as they passed between a plain stone building standing back from the road on the right, and a group of hay and straw stacks, sheds, and farm buildings on the left.

" That's Maister Oldshaw's farm," said the boy.

" Ugh ! " ejaculated Olivia below her breath, hurrying on with angrily averted eyes.

The whole place, seen by the weak light of the rising moon, seemed to her to display the repulsive hideousness of its master.

After this the road wound to the left up

the hill, and they passed a few scattered cottages, one of which was the primitive village post-office.

"That be t' parson's house," said the boy, as they came in sight of an irregularly built stone house, standing high, on the left-hand side of the road, in a well-wooded garden.

They had to go round this garden, and turn sharply to the left into a private road at the top of the hill. This brought them face to face with the gates of the little churchyard, while on the left was the front door of the Vicarage, a pretty building in the Tudor style, which, seen even in the faint moonlight, had a pleasant, welcoming air of comfort, peace, and plenty. Olivia gave the boy his twopence, and rang the bell with a hopeful heart. Everything seemed to promise well for the success of her errand. A neat maid soon came to the door, but to Olivia's inquiry whether Mrs. Brander were at home came the dispiriting answer that she was away. Miss Denison reflected a moment.

"Is Mr. Brander at home?" she then asked.

"Yes, ma'am, Mr. Vernon Brander is in. Will you see him?"

"Yes, if I can."

She followed the servant across the wide, well-warmed hall, to a door at which the maid knocked.

"Come in," said a voice which seemed familiar to Olivia.

"A lady wishes to see you, sir," said the servant.

"Show her in at once," said the man's voice.

Olivia drew back instead of advancing, as the servant made way for her to enter.

"It is Mr. Brander, the clergyman, I wish to see," said Olivia, hurriedly, in a low voice.

"Oh, yes, ma'am, it's all right. Mr. Brander is a clergyman," answered the maid reassuringly.

Before another word could pass, Mr. Brander himself, hearing a discussion, came to the door. Olivia looked at him in some confusion. It was her unknown friend of the afternoon!

CHAPTER IV.

THE MYSTERIOUS FRIEND REVEALS HIMSELF.

OLIVIA's momentary embarrassment was at once removed by the kindness of Mr. Brander's greeting.

"Yes, Mr. Brander is a clergyman. I hope you have no prejudice against the cloth," he said, holding out his hand with a welcoming smile. "It's not a proper clerical garment, I confess," he went on, as Olivia's glance fell instinctively upon the old shooting coat he now wore; "but I flatter myself the collar saves it."

And he pointed to his orthodox round collar.

"I am not sure of that," said the young girl, smiling in answer. "For instance, if I had known this afternoon that you were a clergyman, I should have felt much more at ease about accepting your very kind services."

"Should you? Well, then, you are at ease

about it now. Come in, and tell me if there is anything more I can do for you."

Olivia followed him into the most charmingly luxurious study she had ever seen. Everything in it was comfortable and handsome, in the best modern taste. The doors, mantelpiece, and panelling were of carved light oak, the furniture of the same, upholstered in dark-green morocco. There were *portières* and curtains of dark tapestry, harmonising with the carpet. The books, which filled four large and handsome bookcases, looked to the connoisseur too dainty to be touched by common fingers. Evidences of a woman's presiding eye and hand were there too, Olivia fancied, in a certain graceful draping of the curtains, which seemed to her to betray neither the upholsterer nor the housemaid; in a tall bouquet of dried bulrushes and corn which stood in one corner; and in a small conservatory, full of dark palms and ferns, into which one of the windows opened. Everything was well chosen, everything harmonised with everything else, except the shabbily dressed

figure in the centre, with his lean, dark, worn face, and hungry black eyes, and the tattered volume he held in his hand. Mr. Brander read the thought that flashed through his guest's mind, and asked—

“Now, what is your first impression of this room?”

“It is very, very pretty,” said Olivia.

“Well, and what else?”

“Some one else had more to do with the arrangement of it than you.”

Olivia had never before felt so perfectly at ease with a stranger—so well able to speak her passing thoughts out frankly and freely.

“Right: quite right. And now let me hear what sort of a guess you can make as to the person who had the arrangement of it.”

“It was a lady. Perhaps a lady who has had some art-school training; but one who can think for herself a little too. Not an every-day sort of lady, and yet not eccentric. One whom you would like to know, but whom you might be a little afraid of.”

By the interest and pleasure with which Mr. Brander followed her as she proceeded slowly and cautiously with her conjectures, Olivia felt sure that she was describing his wife, and also that she was getting near the truth. But then a look of pain came into his dark face, which set her wondering whether they had had a severe quarrel, whether there was some serious estrangement between them, or whether the trouble from which he was evidently suffering was caused merely by the absence of the woman of his heart. This singular clergyman, with his unconventional dress and manners, his worn face, and his great kindness, was so different from any of the stiff curates and unctuous vicars she had ever met, that he and his surroundings awoke in her the liveliest interest even apart from the mysterious warning of Sarah Wall, and the surly insolence shown towards him by Farmer Oldshaw. After a short pause, he said—

“ Right in every particular. Now we will see if you can find the lady.”

On the mantelpiece was a collection of photographs, most of them of more or less beautiful women, all handsomely framed. Mr. Brander invited Olivia to come up and inspect them. With another slight feeling of surprise, which she would have found it hard to account for, she stepped on to the soft fur hearthrug and made a careful review of the whole gallery. But here she was quite at a loss.

"I must lose my character for divination," she said at last, shaking her head as she stepped back. "I don't see any face that I could point out with any certainty."

"Try."

She chose one. Mr. Brander shook his head.

"Wrong," he said. "You have disappointed me. What made you choose that one? Give me the nearest approach you can to a reason."

"It looks a good, kind, sensible face."

"It belongs to a good, kind, sensible woman—a Miss Williams—a striking contrast to the

rest of her family," he added as a comment to himself. "But she is not the lady who chose the fittings of this room. What do you say to this one?"

It was Olivia's turn to be disappointed, and her face showed her surprise. The photograph was that of a woman who was very handsome, and there one's reflections concerning her ended. Mr. Brander laughed.

"Say what you think of it quite frankly. I shan't be offended," he said.

"It is a beautiful face," she answered.

"Well, what else?"

"Nothing else," said Olivia in desperation. "Mrs. Brander may have every great quality that ever adorned a woman; but her face, like nearly all very beautiful ones, I think, is just beautiful and nothing else."

"Don't you see any feeling, imagination, passion?"

"No—o, indeed I can't."

"Well, that's all right, because she hasn't any."

Olivia listened rather awkwardly, for Mr. Brander had unconsciously let a little feeling, a little bitterness, sound in the tones of his own voice.

"Do you see great common sense, shrewdness, and a splendid faculty for perceiving where the greatest advantage lies to her and hers?"

His tone was still a little bitter, but it was good-humoured and playful also.

"Oh, no!" said Olivia.

"Well, then, you should see those qualities, for they are all there."

"And may I know who this is?" asked Miss Denison, to turn the conversation from a point where she had no more to say.

She was looking at the companion frame to that which contained the lady's portrait. It held the picture of a strikingly handsome man, not far off middle age, plump, good-humoured, and prosperous-looking, dressed in correct clerical costume, with a beautiful child seated on his knee.

"That is my brother."

“Your brother!”

All the rules of courtesy could not avail to hide her surprise then. A greater contrast could not be imagined than that between this worn, haggard, ascetic-looking, shabby man, with his unconventional dress and manner, and the neat, smiling, comfortable-looking gentleman, who seemed to beam from his morocco frame on a world where tithe wars were not. Then a light flashed upon Olivia, and she gave Mr. Brander a smile of triumphant shrewdness.

“Now I understand it all,” she said, eagerly. “This room is your brother’s, and this lady is not your wife, but his.”

Mr. Brander laughed rather sadly.

“You think they all ‘match’ with him better than they would with me.”

Olivia grew very red, and in some confusion tried to explain away this too obvious conclusion. But Mr. Brander stopped her.

“You are quite, quite right,” he said, kindly. “You would be blind if you couldn’t see. My sister-in-law saw it, twelve years ago,

when she was wise enough to reject me and to take my brother."

"There, now you see why Mrs. Meredith Brander is destitute of feeling, imagination, and passion, and resplendent only in the less lovable qualities," he went on, mocking at himself good-humouredly. "If she had only chosen me, I should have a very different tale to tell, you may be sure."

Olivia was silent. The strange contrast between the two brothers filled her with pity for the one who had been kind to her, and with a sort of unreasonable antagonism towards the unknown one to whom fortune had been so much more generous.

"It seems very hard on you," she said, glancing at him rather shyly.

But even as she spoke a violent change came over his face which chilled and repelled her, and brought back to her mind with sudden and startling vividness the vague warning of the old woman. A flush of fierce and vindictive anger, a short, sharp struggle with himself, and then

Mr. Brander was subdued and kind and courteous as ever. But this peep at the nature underneath had made an impression upon Olivia which she could not readily forget; it destroyed the ease she had felt with him, and woke a distrust which his instant return to his old kindly manner failed to remove.

"It is very good of you to think so," he said, with a courteous smile. "At one time I admit it seemed hard to me too. But I've been forced to confess long ago that I could not have occupied the position he fills either with credit to myself or satisfaction to anybody else. While, as for poor Evelyn, if she had had the misfortune to take me, with my bad temper and my inevitable hatred of order, instead of being still handsome, amiable, and young, she would be a haggard old woman."

Remembering, as she did, the bitterness which he had previously shown in speaking of his sister-in-law, and the fierce animosity which had blazed out of his black eyes a moment ago in recalling the contrast between his brother and

himself, Olivia could not help feeling there was a little hypocrisy in this ultra-modest speech, and she made some civil answer in a tone which showed constraint in comparison with her previous warm-hearted and simple frankness. Mr. Brander looked scrutinisingly at her face, and reading the change in its expression, hastened to open another and less dangerous subject.

“And here I have been gossiping about my own idle affairs all this time, without once asking you what you came to see me about, and what I can do for you.”

“I brought a letter of introduction to Mrs. Brander,” said Olivia, producing it. “The wife of one of the curates at Streatham, where I live, or at least where I have been living,” she added, correcting herself, “knew Mrs. Brander some years ago. And she thought, as I was coming here all by myself, it would be pleasanter for me to know some one.”

“My sister-in-law would have helped you in a hundred ways,” said Mr. Brander, regretfully.

"She is a very energetic woman, and loves to have some active work to do for anybody, if there is a little occasion to show fight over it. And there is in your case; for that unmannerly old ruffian, John Oldshaw, who made himself so offensive just now at the inn, wanted to have the farm your father has taken, and will annoy you all in every way he can for spite, if I'm not mistaken."

"If he does, I shall get papa to complain to Lord Stannington," said Miss Denison, with a resolute expression about her mouth.

"Well, we must hope there won't be any need to do so. Perhaps your father is a better farmer than John Oldshaw, and will be able to make him sing small."

"Oh, I'm afraid not," said she, shaking her head dolefully; "papa has never been a farmer before. He's been a banker, but he never did much banking, I think; and the other partners bought him out of the bank a little while ago, and he did nothing at all for a little while. But we are not rich enough to live like that, so he

thought he should like to try farming, especially as my step-mother had been ordered to live in the country."

Mr. Brander looked grave. He could not help thinking that things looked very black for his pretty visitor. A weak and idle father, an invalid step-mother, such were the fancy portraits he instantly drew of the pair, setting up as amateurs in a business which even experience, industry, and capacity can scarcely nowadays make remunerative! What would become of the bright girl in these circumstances?

"How came they to send you down here all by yourself?" he asked, after a pause.

"My step-mother—you know I told you I had a step-mother," she interpolated, with mischievous meaning—"has delicate health; that is to say, her health is too delicate for her ever to do anything she doesn't wish to do, and she did not wish to come down to an empty house, to have all the worry and trouble of filling it. So I offered to do it. Home has been rather tiresome lately, and I thought it would be fun, and besides

that I really wanted to be useful, and to make things as comfortable as I could for poor papa. But I did think she would see that the furniture was sent in time."

"Yes, that's an awkward business, certainly. We must consider what is best to be done. And while I'm thinking it over, you'll have a glass of wine and a biscuit, won't you?" said he, as he touched the bell.

Olivia did not refuse. She thought her best chance of a happy issue out of her difficulties lay in trusting to the clergyman, whose persistent kindness was fast effacing the unpleasant impression of a few minutes before. She even asked him ingeniously whether he thought she ought to stay any longer away from the bare house where she had left poor little Lucy alone with the mice. Mr. Brander quieted her conscience as, in obedience to his order, the maid-servant brought in wine and cake, with which he proceeded to serve the hungry girl.

"I shall let you go in two minutes now," he said. "And we won't let Lucy starve either."

The servant was still waiting.

"What is it, Hester?"

"Young Mr. Williams has called, sir. He wishes to speak to you for a minute. I believe he has a message."

Mr. Brander's face clouded.

"Where is he? I'll go out and speak to him," he said, shortly.

But the words were scarcely out of his mouth when a voice, speaking in coarse and familiar tones, was heard outside the door, heralding the approach of the new-comer.

"It's all right; it's only me. Suppose I can come in, eh?"

And, without waiting for permission, a young man elbowed his way past the servant, and entered the room.

The word which applied best to Mr. Frederick Williams, including his face, voice, dress, and manner, was "cub." He was short and sandy; he had an expression of mingled dulness and cunning, in which dulness predominated; his dress, his vocabulary, and a

certain roll in his walk, smacked of the stable; and the only conspicuous quality he showed to balance these disadvantages was a certain coarse good humour which never failed him. He was even destitute of that very common grace in young men of his type—an unsurmountable shyness in the presence of women of refinement. On catching sight of Olivia, seated by the fire, eating cake with unmistakable enjoyment, his eyes opened wide with astonishment and boorish admiration, which gave place the next moment to an expression of intense shyness, as, with a loud cough, he affected to retreat to the door.

“ Oh, I beg pardon, Mr. Brander; I didn’t mean to interrupt such a pleasant *tête-à-tête*, I’m sure.”

But he had no intention of going, and Mr. Brander asked him rather curtly what he came for.

“ Oh, my business is of no consequence; it will do any time,” answered Mr. Williams, still with his light eyes fixed upon Olivia.

"Very likely. But what is it?" asked Mr. Brander, still more shortly.

"Oh, my father wants to see you about something. It's about the church, I believe; your church, St. Cuthbert's. He wants to do something for it, I fancy; says the condition it's in is a disgrace to the neighbourhood."

Again Olivia saw on Mr. Brander's face a glimpse of fierce anger, with which, however, she this time heartily sympathised. Feeling very uncomfortable, she rose and held out her hand to the clergyman. His face cleared as he took it.

"Now, don't worry yourself too much about the wretched furniture," he said, with his old kindness. "As you go down the hill, mind you stop where the roads cross. There's a wishing-cap hangs on the hedge just there. If you see it, put it on; if you don't, make the motion of putting it on, and at the same time say these words just under your breath, 'I wish that within an hour I may be installed very comfortably!'"

"Thank you," said Olivia, laughing and returning the pressure of his hand warmly; "if the wishing-cap could bring that to pass, I should begin to look with respect on a broom-stick."

Mr. Williams' face had assumed during these two last speeches an expression of mingled bewilderment and contempt. As the lady moved towards the door, he followed without having once taken his eyes off her.

"Will you be able to find your way?" asked Mr. Brander, as he opened the study door.

"I'll go with you; I'll escort you. Which way are you going?" asked Mr. Williams, eagerly. "To the Hall, eh? I go past it; don't I, Brander?"

"I believe so," said the clergyman, shortly.

"So, you see, you're not putting me to any inconvenience at all," went on the young man.

"Oh, I didn't think of that," said Miss Denison, with a little laugh and a pretty

turn of the head. "In my part of the world it is never an inconvenience to see a lady home."

In the meantime they had all crossed the hall and arrived at the front door, where Mr. Brander, with a reluctant frown at his male visitor, again shook hands warmly with Olivia, and told her not to lose heart. He watched the ill-assorted pair as they went down the lane until they turned into the high road. Until they reached this point they proceeded in silence, but as soon as they began to descend the hill, the young man found voice after his snub.

"You're deuced sharp on a fellow," he said then, in a conciliatory tone. "It wasn't my fault that I turned up when the parson was making sheeps' eyes at you."

"If I am to put up with your society until I reach the Hall gates, I really must ask you to abstain from making offensive remarks," said Olivia, icily.

"Offensive! Oh, all right. But I warn you that parson chap is a deal more likely

to be offensive than I am. By Jove!" he continued, after a freezing pause; "if you weren't such a pretty girl I'm hanged if I'd go a step further with you, after your rudeness."

"In your own choice language, 'I'm hanged' if you shall," answered Miss Denison, with spirit.

Before the astonished young man could recover his speech the girl had flown down the hill like an arrow with the wind. He had admired her before; for this display of spirit he felt that he adored her. At this point the road made a circuitous bend, which could be cut off by one familiar with the place by crossing the fields. Fred Williams was through a gap in the hedge in a moment, and on regaining the road he was a few yards ahead of the still flying lady. Darting out upon her as she passed, he seized her by the arm; and as the attack was unexpected, she staggered for a second.

"You're a splendid runner, but you can't beat me," said the young gentleman, with what

was meant to be an alluring mixture of admiration and manly condescension.

But it had quite a wrong effect upon the lady. Pausing one moment to recover her breath and her balance, she extricated herself from his insolent clutch with a sudden athletic movement which flung him reeling into the hedge, where he lodged amid a great crackling of branches.

“I shall not require your escort further, thank you,” said Miss Denison then imperturbably to the spluttering swain.

And she walked on again with a perfect and defiant security. She had not misjudged her effect, for Mr. Williams did not attempt to molest her again. Just as she reached the farm gates, however, he hurried after her, and without coming to close quarters, said, maliciously—

“Very well, madam. Don’t be afraid that I shall interfere with you again. But before you take up with Parson Brander, I’d just ask him, if I were you, what has become of Nellie Mitchell.”

But Miss Denison walked through the gates without a word.

CHAPTER V.

A STARTLING CHARGE.

To be able to inflict a severe physical defeat upon an obtrusive admirer may be a highly convenient accomplishment, but the necessity for its exercise cannot but be a humiliating experience. Olivia Denison felt the hot tears rise to her eyes as she walked up through the farmyard to the Hall. If only one of her own stalwart brothers, Edward or Ernest, were here to give this insolent cad the thrashing he deserved! But Edward was in India with his regiment, and Ernest was tied to a desk in a solicitor's office in London. She must depend upon her own arm and her own head for protection now; fortunately, neither was of the weakest, as she herself felt with some satisfaction. In fact, she scarcely knew yet what measure of strength, both mental and physical, was hers; for she had led hitherto

an easy, sheltered life, idle in the sense that all her energy had been spent in amusing herself, happy but for certain uncongenial elements at home.

Now there was to be a difference. Without being expected to know how it came to pass, Olivia knew that papa had grown poorer, that he had become frightfully irritable about bills of late, and that various violent and spasmodic efforts at retrenchment, and papa's reiterated declarations that he must "do something," had culminated in the sale of the beautiful house at Streatham, and in the taking of Rishton Hall Farm. There was something not quite painful in the feeling that she would have to "do something" too, and in the knowledge that she might now be able to turn her quickness of eye and hand to useful account in the service of the father whom she adored. What would his sensitive nature do among these Oldshaws, and these Williamses, and these Walls, with the most unpleasant and disturbing rumours afloat about the very clergyman in charge? This was

the reflection which troubled Olivia's mind as she approached the Hall for the second time, and going up the worn steps, let herself in without any need to knock at the door.

"Lucy!" she called, as she opened the door of the big room on the right.

There was no answer. The room was deserted, and the fire had burnt low. Olivia shivered as she went in. The run down the hill had put her in a glow; the entrance into this mouldy old chamber chilled her. She put more wood on the fire, and sat down to await the return of Lucy, who, she did not doubt, had found the loneliness of the place too much for her nerves, and had gone out to look for her mistress. In a few minutes Olivia began to long even for the patter of a mouse's feet, for the song of a cricket, for any sign of life in the desolate old house, if it were only the sight of the loathely blackbeetle. The spirit of the unknown Nellie Mitchell seemed to haunt her. That girl, who had lived in the house, gone about her daily work in this room, whose

mementoes still remained undisturbed and undecayed in these deserted old walls, who was she? What had become of her? "Ask Mr. Brander"; so the odious Fred Williams had said, with intensely malicious significance. Should she dare to do this, and perhaps satisfy once for all those doubts of her new friend which not only the conflicting opinions of the villagers, but certain morose and repellent changes of expression on his own face, had instilled into her? She could not decide. Between her doubts, her loneliness, and her sense of the difficulties of her desolate situation, the poor girl was growing so unhappy, that when at last she heard the sound of footsteps upon the ground outside, she sprang up with a cry, and ran to the door, ready to force whoever it might be to share her vigil.

On the doorstep she found Sarah Wall, whom conscience, or a glimmering notion that it might be as well to be "in wi' t' new fowk," had brought back to make inquiries.

"Hasna' yer goods coom?" she asked, rather apologetically.

"No; they won't come to-night now," answered Miss Denison with a sigh.

"There's summat—a cart or a waggon or summat—at t' gate now."

The hope was too much. Olivia gave a little cry. But when, a little later, there absolutely did drive up through the farmyard, and draw up at the door, a small open cart closely packed with bedroom furniture, she could scarcely keep from bursting into tears. For the first few minutes she was too overjoyed to perceive anything very singular in this arrival. In the front of the cart, beside the driver, sat two neat and buxom country girls, who sprang down to the ground with much suppressed excitement and half-hysterical laughter, and without any explanation of their presence, proceeded, with the help of the driver, to unpack the cart, and to carry the contents indoors and upstairs. Olivia stood back bewildered. One had a lantern and the other a broom; neither would advance a step towards the old house, or up the wide staircase, without the comfort and support of the other's

near presence. But up they did go at last, stifling little screams at every other step, and returning the jibes of the driver with prompt retorts. This young man looked like a stable-boy, or perhaps a groom in undress. As he came downstairs again, after having taken up a folding bedstead, Olivia asked him where he came from.

"From t' Vicarage, miss," he answered, with a stableman's salute. "Mr. Vernon sent us down and told us to put t' things in and coom back as quick as we could. T' lasses was to clean oot a roomoopstairs for ye."

Sarah Wall was emitting a series of witch-like grunts in the background.

"Mr. Vernon!" cried Olivia; "Mr. Vernon Brander! Oh, how very kind of him! How very kind!"

"He'll be down hisself just now, miss, I think," continued the lad; "he said he'd coom wi' t' second lot."

Here Mrs. Wall broke in with a preliminary croaking cough—

"Nea, nea. He wunna coom a-nigh this

house. He coomed here too often in t' owd time. Nea, nea! He wunna coom inside noo."

"Howd tha tongue, Sal," said the lad, quickly. "Thoo'd get thasen in' trouble wi' t' vicar if he heerd tha prattling so o' 's brother."

Whereupon the old woman fell to incoherent mumbling, and the lad, having discharged his load, saluted the young lady again, and drove away. With a pleasant sense upon her that help, ready and efficient, was indeed come at last, Olivia went indoors again, and, directed by the sounds of active sweeping, and at least as active chattering, found her way to the best bedroom in this part of the house, which the exertions of the two maids were quickly rendering habitable. They had brought with them even a large scuttleful of coals, and a supply of candles. In half an hour the room was swept, a fire lighted, carpet laid down, and two little beds and a suite of bedroom furniture disposed to the best advantage.

"Mr. Vernon said we was only to fit up one

bedroom, ma'am, as you'd be sure to want your maid to sleep in the same room with you in this big empty house, miss," said the elder and more responsible of the servants.

"Yes, that is quite true," answered Miss Denison, promptly.

"And as soon as we had done this room we was to sweep out the big one downstairs."

"Oh," said Miss Denison, "you need not do that. One room is plenty for us to go on with, and I don't wish you to have the trouble of doing any more."

"Oh, it's no trouble, ma'am. And those were Mr. Vernon's orders. And when the master and missus is away, we have orders to do just as Mr. Vernon says, exactly as if he was master. You see, master thinks such a deal of Mr. Vernon."

Here was another instance of the strange enthusiasm for Mr. Vernon Brander which he seemed to excite equally with the most violent antagonism.

"I wouldn't ha' come here by myself, though;

not if Mr. Vernon had ordered me ever so : no, and not if master and Mrs. Brander hadn't ordered me too, that I wouldn't ! " broke in the younger maid, with decision.

Miss Denison caught sight of a severe frown and a bit of expressive pantomime, signifying that she was to hold her tongue, from her older and more discreet companion.

" How is that ? " asked the young lady.
" Do you think this house is haunted ? "

" Of course not, ma'am, " broke in the elder.
" Susan, you ought to be ashamed of yourself, telling such silly stuff. Of course, ma'am, when a house lies empty some time there's all sorts of tales gets about, and I daresay if you hadn't come and taken it, in another year there'd ha' been a whole lot of ghost stories and such-like about it."

Miss Denison saw that there was nothing to be learnt here, so she asked no more questions, but waited eagerly for the arrival of Mr. Brander. At last, from the position she had taken up on the steps outside the front door, she heard the

clergyman's voice and the sound of wheels and hoofs at the same time ; a few seconds later the cart, again piled with furniture, stopped at the door, and Mr. Brander, springing down from his place beside the driver, held out a helping hand to the third person in the cart, who proved to be no other than Lucy. Instead of jumping out with her usual activity, however, the little maid hung back in the most nervous manner, and finally had almost to be lifted out of the vehicle, uttering words of protest in a hoarse whisper.

"Lucy ! Why, what's the matter with you ?" asked her young mistress kindly, perceiving by the light of the lantern the clergyman carried that the bright red colour had left the girl's round cheeks, and that her eyes were distended with some absorbing horror.

"Nothing, Miss Olivia—nothing," stammered she, faintly. "I—I went out to look for you. I thought you might have lost your way—and—and—"

"As Eben and I were driving down the hill we met her, and, finding that she was looking

for you, Miss Denison, I made her get up and come on with the luggage."

He did not look at Lucy, neither did she look at him, and in the course of the work of unloading and furnishing in which they now both proceeded to take an active part, Olivia could not help noticing the ashy paleness that came over the maid's face, and the way in which she shrank into herself, if accident brought her in close contact with the gentleman. The installation now went on merrily. To Olivia's great relief Mr. Brander, contrary to Sarah Wall's prediction, showed not the least reluctance to enter the old house, but went backwards and forwards between the cart and the big room until there was nothing left to bring in.

"We haven't brought nearly enough furniture to fill this big room, you know," he explained, as he trundled in a roll of carpet. "The cart would only hold just sufficient to make you a little oasis at the fireplace end; but it's better than the bare boards, and to-morrow we'll hope you'll have your own things about you."

"Oh, Mr. Brander, I can't thank you," said Olivia, overwhelmed. "You have built a palace for us in the desert; but what will the vicar say? He will come back and find that you have ransacked his beautiful house on behalf of two utter strangers! I shall never dare to look Mrs. Brander in the face after taking part in such a sacrilege."

"My brother would say nothing if I were to turn all the drawing-room furniture out into the churchyard," answered he, promptly. "You mustn't judge his temper by my black looks. He and I are as different as heaven and—earth. All the ladies fall in love with him."

"Then I shall not," said Miss Denison, decidedly. "I like my loves all to myself."

Mr. Brander considered her attentively, with a quizzical look.

"I should think you would," he said, smiling. "I am afraid you will be badly off down here—if indeed you could be badly off for admirers anywhere. The nearest approach to an

eligible swain in these parts is the gentleman who escorted you home."

Olivia, who was nailing up a curtain while Mr. Brander kept steady the erection of a box and a chair on which she stood, put down her hammer to indulge in a hearty burst of laughter.

"Oh, I'm afraid it's all over with the pretty little romance you have been building up for me," she said, looking down with her bright eyes still twinkling with amusement. "I pushed him into a hedge!"

"At the first blush that does not look promising, certainly," said Mr. Brander, with perfect gravity, "considering the rank of the parties. For if he had been the clodhopper nature intended him for, and you the dairymaid he would have liked you to be, such a demonstration as that would have been the certain prelude to a wedding."

"It wasn't a very ladylike thing to do, I'm afraid," said Olivia, blushing a very becoming crimson. "But really he was not the sort of person to be dealt with by means of modest

little screams and flutterings. And—well, the truth is, I really was so furiously angry that I would have thrown him *over* the hedge if I'd been strong enough."

"I wish you belonged to my parish," said Mr. Brander, reflectively. "It is a great pity such nerve and muscle should be thrown away. Now, there's an old villain who always nods through the first part of my sermon, and snores as soon as I grow a little eloquent—and—and I daren't throw him into the hedge myself; my motives might be questioned. But if I could only get a fair and amiable parishioner to do it for me, no one could say a word."

"You want to make me ashamed of myself," said Olivia, giving a vicious blow to the nail she was driving in. "But you shan't succeed. My father and my two brothers think that everything I do is right."

"Ah! Then it's high time somebody turned up to prove to you that everything you do is wrong."

"Thank you. My step-mother does that."

"Then what do papa and the brothers say to her?"

"If the world's turning round depended on dear old papa's saying a harsh word to anybody, the world would stand still. As for my brothers, especially Ted, when he is at home breakfast is a skirmish with my step-mother, luncheon is a brisk engagement, and dinner a hard-fought battle. They are always ordering each other out of the room, and it's quite a rare thing for them both to sit out a meal at the same table."

"The fault is not quite all on one side, I suppose."

"Oh, no, of course not. When poor Ted is away life is not very comfortable, but at least it is not volcanic."

"Curious that the common or garden step-mother, wherever found, should always present the same characteristics. She has children of her own, I suppose?"

"Yes, two."

"You don't love them—I perceive by your tone."

"Wait till you see them, and then say whether anybody could."

"I think my professional ministrations are wanted here. Where is your Christian charity?"

Olivia turned round to look down upon him with the most earnest gravity.

"I shall take the liberty of asking you the same question when Regie gets caressed for his vivacity in cutting a slit in your umbrella, and when you see Beatrice consoled with an orange for some impertinence for which she ought to have her ears boxed."

"And it's all the fault of the step-mother?"

"Yes, all."

"Poor lady; I am beginning to feel the deepest interest in her. No doubt she was a perfectly amiable and harmless person before this unhappy metamorphosis."

"Yes; she was our governess—a most excellent woman, and very strict with us."

"I must see what can be done for her. I have a sermon that will just suit her, I think; one that hasn't done duty for a long time."

"It will be of no use. When she was our governess she never missed church; now she's our step-mother she never goes."

The curtains were by this time hung; the two maids from the Vicarage, after helping Lucy to give the last touches to the arrangement of the furniture, had run upstairs to see that all was in order in the bedroom, and perhaps also to have a little gossip with this new friend. Mr. Brander looked about eagerly in search of more work.

"There's nothing more to do, I am afraid," he said, rather wistfully.

Olivia smiled. "Afraid!" she echoed. "Why, I should think you would be very glad to shake off the dust and the damp of this old place, and to get back to that beautiful, cosy room where I found you this evening."

As she spoke an uncomfortable remembrance of the mystery which hung about the house and its rumoured connection with him came into her mind. Mr. Brander looked straight into her face, and said—

“Under some circumstances I might be. For I knew this place very well before it was left to dust and damp. But now I am glad to think that it is going to have life and youth and brightness in it again—very glad; and I don’t want to hurry away at all.”

He spoke so gravely, and expressed his reluctance to go so naïvely, that Olivia was silent, not quite knowing in what tone to answer him. Then it suddenly struck him that he might have offended her, and without looking into her face again he hastened to say—

“You must excuse my boorishness if I don’t express myself in the orthodox way. I live like a hermit, and have done for the last”—he paused, and then added slowly, as if counting up the time—“ten years. I have forgotten how to make pretty phrases. What I meant was this: I haven’t had half an hour’s pleasant talk with a lady, as I have with you this evening, for all that time—ten years! And it will very likely be ten years before I have another. And so I have enjoyed myself, and I am sorry it’s over,

though I daresay you are rather tired of the rustic parson and his solecisms."

An awkward constraint had fallen upon him ; he had grown shy and unhappy. Olivia felt sorry for him, and she answered in tones of sweet feminine gentleness which seemed to pour balm upon some hidden wound.

"I believe part of what you say. For if you had been used to ladies' society you must have known that talking to you has given me at least as much pleasure as talking to me can have given you. And if you are not going to have another talk with me for another ten years, as you threaten, it will be your fault, and not mine."

There was a pretty graciousness in her manner, the result of the homage her beauty had always obtained for her. Mr. Brander gave her a shy glance of adoring gratitude which momentarily lit up his dark face.

"Thank you," he said, in a low voice. "I shall remember your pretty words and your kind looks, believe me ; but when we next meet, it

will not be the same, and it will be no fault of yours."

Olivia was on the point of breaking out into a passionate assurance that no hearsay talk altered her opinion of her friends ; but a certain gloom which settled on his face and gave him almost a forbidding aspect checked her, and she remembered, while a deep blush crept into her handsome cheeks, that it is unconventionally premature to call the acquaintance of half a day a friend. So she remained modestly silent while he held out his hand and told her, recovering his usual manner, that he should write a full description of her to his sister-in-law, and that Miss Denison might expect to be chartered as a district visitor before she had time or inclination to say "Jack Robinson."

Mr. Brander then called the two maids and started them on their walk ; brought in a luncheon basket which he had left in the hall, and handed it to Lucy, telling her to open it when her mistress felt inclined for supper ; and, before Olivia could thank him for this fresh

proof of his kindness, he was already out of the house.

The door had scarcely closed upon him when Lucy, with an exclamation of horror and disgust, flung down the luncheon basket, and, running to the nearest window, threw it wide open.

“What are you doing, Lucy?” asked her mistress in astonishment, crossing quickly to the girl to see whether she was ill.

“Airing the place, miss, after that bad, wicked man,” answered the little maid, vehemently.

“You ungrateful girl, after all Mr. Brander has done for us. How can you say such things?”

“I say what I know, miss, and what is known all over the place, miss, to every one but you,” answered Lucy, her face crimson with excitement. “He’s a murderer, miss; he murdered the poor girl who used to live in those rooms upstairs.”

Olivia was standing at the window, with her hand on the latch to close it. Just as Lucy hissed out those words in a voice shrill and

broken with horror, Mr. Brander passed. The light from the room fell full upon his face. He had heard the girl's words. A look, not of indignation, but of shame, of agony, convulsed his pale features, but he did not turn his head. Olivia shivered. She wanted to call out to him, to ask him to deny this infamous slander; but her mouth was dry and the words would not come. For he must have heard, she knew, and yet there was no denial in his face.

With a trembling hand she closed the window.

"There, it's quite upset you; I knew it would, Miss Olivia," said Lucy, rather triumphantly. "Aren't you shocked?"

But the tears were gathering in Olivia's eyes.

"I'm shocked, yes, of course," said she, sadly. "And I'm dreadfully—dreadfully sorry."

Lucy was scandalised. This was not the way in which she had been taught to look upon a criminal.

CHAPTER VI.

AN OBJECTIONABLE VISITOR.

IN spite of all her philosophy, of all her fortitude, Olivia Denison could not deny, even to herself, that the one terrible word "murderer," applied to the man who had proved himself such a kind friend, gave a shock such as no newly-formed friendship could stand unshaken. If he had only denied the charge by so much as a look! But, on the contrary, his downcast head and hurrying step when Lucy's indiscreet remark fell on his ears seemed like a tacit admission of the justice of it. The little maid's characteristic comments on the matter jarred upon her greatly.

"You might have knocked me down with a feather, Miss Olivia, when they first told me it was him as made away with the young woman whose rooms we were rummaging in

to-day ! ‘Lor,’ I says, ‘never ! A nice-spoken gentleman like that !’ Indeed, Miss——”

“Who was it told you, Lucy ?” interrupted her mistress, quietly.

“It was when I was going up the road, ma’am, looking for you. For I got that frightened at last, sitting here all by myself, and nobody to speak to, and such cracklings and noises as you never heard along the walls ! So I went out a little way, thinking perhaps you had missed the road and lost yourself. And I came across two women and a man standing at the gate of a farmyard. And I spoke to them, and they guessed where I came from ; for it seems it was the farm belonging to that rude man, though I didn’t know it at the time. And they asked me in, saying as they wouldn’t keep me not a minute. And I was so glad not to be alone that I went just inside the kitchen door with them—just for a minute. But then they told me such things that I felt I couldn’t come back to this house all by myself after hearing of

them. They said how that clergyman, for all his nice-seeming ways, used to be a wild sort of young man, and how he once courted her that's now the vicar's lady, but she wouldn't have nothing to say to him. And so when she married his brother he got wilder and wilder, and he took to courting the farmer's daughter that lived here, on the sly like, and not fair and open. She was a masterful sort of girl, and her brother and his wife, that she lived with, let her have her own way too much, and have ideas above her station. And people think she believed he'd marry her, for her own people and every one was beginning to talk; and then one night—it was the 7th of July, miss, ten years and a half ago—she went out to meet him, down by his own church, as people knew she'd done before, and she never came back. And nobody's never seen nothing of her from that day to this; only there were screams heard that night down by St. Cuthbert's—that's his church, ma'am."

Lucy ended in a mysterious whisper, and

both she and her mistress remained silent for a little while. Then Miss Denison spoke in a warm and decided tone—

“There must have been investigations made. If there had been anything like just ground for supposing that Mr. Brander had made away with the girl, he would at least have been hunted out of the parish, even if there had not been proof enough to have him arrested.”

“He was arrested, Miss Olivia. But his mother was Lord Stannington’s sister, so he had friends at court; and as for his brother, he moved heaven and earth to have him got off. And so those as knew most didn’t dare to come forward, and nothing wasn’t found; and as everybody knew the poor girl hadn’t had the best of characters, and had always been a bit gay like, they said there wasn’t evidence enough, and Mr. Brander was never brought up.”

“But he remained in his parish! That would have been too much of a scandal if the

suspicion had been strong. I think you have only been listening to a lot of tattle, Lucy," said Miss Denison, trying to disguise the deep interest she could not help feeling in this gossip.

"Well, Miss Olivia, I only tell you what was told me," said the girl, rather offended at the slur cast upon her information.

And she crossed over to the fireplace and began to break the lumps of coal into a blaze, to intimate that, in deference to her mistress's wish, she had done with idle gossip. But, as she slyly guessed, the subject was far too interesting to be shelved like that.

Miss Denison took it up again abruptly, no longer attempting to hide the warmth of her feeling in the matter.

"How was it he stayed, then?" she asked.

"It was his brother's doing, that, ma'am, I believe," said Lucy, delighted to have her tongue loosed again. "He backed him up, and advised him to face it out, so everybody says. And his being so strong for his brother,

and him thought so highly of himself, made people afraid to interfere, like. And so Mr. Vernon stayed. He had only a poor parish, full of colliers and such like, and the poor folk liked him, because, for all his wild ways, he was good humoured and pleasant. So nobody objected much, and he quieted down all of a sudden, and grew quite changed, and worked very hard, so that now they think the world of him in his own parish, and wouldn't change even to have Mr. Meredith himself for their clergyman. Only the story sticks to him, especially close round here, where the girl lived ; and, no matter what he does, some of them can't forget he's a murderer."

Olivia shuddered. It was quite true ; such an incident in a man's life was not one that you could forget. She let the subject drop without further comment, but it haunted her for the rest of the evening as she sat brooding over the fire. Lucy, who was of an industrious frame of mind, got out her darning and mended away busily. But she had a healthy appetite,

and she had had nothing more satisfying than biscuits and a sandwich throughout the day. Gradually her longing glances fell more and more frequently on the despised supper basket which Mr. Brander had given her. At last she could hold out no longer.

"Are you hungry, Miss Olivia?" she asked, with plaintive meaning.

"Not very," answered Miss Denison, waking with a start out of a troubled reverie. "But I daresay you are, Lucy. I forgot that I had wine and cake at—Mr. Brander's."

Lucy made two hesitating steps in the direction of the basket, and stopped.

"Do you think—we'd better not—touch it, Miss Olivia?" she asked, doubtfully.

Miss Denison got up, with a grave and troubled face.

"Don't you think it's a little too late to try to avoid an obligation, Lucy, when every one of the comforts round us—fire, chairs, table, the very beds we are going to sleep on, we owe to Mr. Brander?"

Lucy snatched at this view of the matter readily, and trotted off with eager steps to inspect the contents of the basket. These proved most satisfactory.

“ Bread, Miss Olivia ; butter, cake, oh ! And a cold fowl ! And a silver teapot ! ” she announced gleefully, as she made one discovery after another, and skipped with her prizes to the table.

Olivia, healthy girl as she was, could not eat much that evening. Her responsibilities in the new home were beginning to look very heavy ; and the strange story she had just heard oppressed her. Lucy, on the other hand, found that a good supper led her to take a more cheerful view of current affairs.

“ Oh, Miss Olivia ! ” she exclaimed, when the meal was ended, and they were preparing to retire for the night, “ how much nicer this is, with ghosts and murderers and all, than it’ll be when Mrs. Denison comes and the children. Like this, with just you, it’s jolly, and I could work for you all day. And I suppose when you’ve

committed a murder it makes you feel that you must be nicer, like, to make up for it, for certainly Mr. Brander is a nice-spoken gentleman, and a kind one, and no two ways about it."

"Now, Lucy," said her mistress, gravely, "you must put that story right out of your head, as I am going to do. We'll hope there's no truth in it at all ; but even if every word were true, we have no right to bring it up against a man whose life sets an example to the whole parish, and who has shown us kindness that we ought never to forget. I hope you will have the good sense and good feeling not to tattle about it to cook and to Esther when they come."

"No, ma'am," said Lucy, demurely.

Miss Denison felt, however, that she was trying to put on human nature burdens too great for it to bear, and she wasted no more words in pressing the point. Tired as she was when she lay down that night on the little bed so strangely provided, for some hours she could not sleep ; excited fancies concerning the girl who had disappeared, and the man to whom her

disappearance was attributed, filled her head with a waking nightmare. Gratitude remained uppermost, however.

"He shall see that whatever I have heard makes not the least difference," was her last clear thought before sleeping.

But Olivia's kind intentions were more difficult to carry out than she imagined. Next day she saw nothing of Mr. Brander, although she received another proof of his thoughtfulness. A vanful of the much-expected furniture arrived in the course of the morning; and scarcely was it emptied before the two maids from the Vicarage appeared again upon the scene, "by Mr. Vernon's order," to give what assistance they could towards getting the house ready for occupation. Then began for Olivia three of the happiest days she had ever passed. There was work—real, useful, genuine work—for head and hand and muscular arm, in the arrangement of every room to the best advantage. The maids from the Vicarage and her own trusted Lucy seconded her with a right good will, being all

ready to worship this handsome, bright-voiced, sparkling-eyed girl, to whom the lifting of the heaviest weights seemed to be child's play, and who worked harder than any of them. On the second day the very last consignment of the household goods duly arrived, and Olivia was able to send back the Vicarage furniture with a grateful little note of thanks. In the evening, when she was resting in an armchair, tired out with her labours, and enjoying a glow of satisfaction in their success, there was a rap of knuckles on the knockerless outer door, and Olivia started up, with her heart beating violently. This persistent self-effacement on the part of Mr. Brander made the girl nervously anxious to show him that her gratitude was proof against any evil rumours; and the hope that it was he brought a deep flush to her face as Lucy, now installed in her own kitchen, and busy still with polishing of pots and pans, went to open the door. But she only brought in a note, which Olivia took with some disappointment. It was an answer from Mr. Brander to

her own, but was so very formal that Olivia felt her cheeks tingle with shame at the impulsive warmth of her letter.

The clergyman's note was as follows :—

"DEAR MADAM" (And she had put "Dear Mr. Brander." Olivia could have torn her pretty hair.)—"I beg to assure you there is nothing in what I have done to put you under any sense of obligation. In doing what little I could to make you as comfortable as the unfortunate circumstances of your arrival would permit, I only acted in my capacity of representative to my brother, who is hospitality itself to all strangers.

"I am, dear madam, yours faithfully,
"VERNON BRANDER."

Olivia read the note twice, while Lucy still stood at the door.

"The young farmer's son brought it, ma'am, and he's waiting," said she.

Olivia went to the door, and held out her hand to Mat Oldshaw, who took it very sheepishly in his own great paw, and, having given it a convulsive squeeze, dropped it hastily, as if overwhelmed with horror at his presumption in touching it at all.

"Come in," said she, smiling, and leading the way into the big farm living-room. She had decided that this was to be the dining-room of the establishment, and had furnished it accordingly.

Mat followed her shyly, and remained near the door until, by easy stages, she had coaxed him into a chair at the further end. He was beautifully washed and combed, and clad in his best clothes, and beautifully awkward and bashful withal.

"It's very kind of you to bring me this," she said, "and I'm very glad to have an opportunity of thanking you for the help you gave us the other day. You ran away so fast that I had no chance of speaking to you."

"'Twere nowt that," said Mat, in a voice husky from bashfulness. "Ah'd ha' coom and given ye better help than that yesterday when Ah saw t' goods coom, but Ah didn't like."

"Would you? Well, we should have found plenty for you to do. But your father wouldn't have liked it, of course?"

"Feyther! Ah beeant afreead o' feyther!" cried Mat, in a burst of energetic defiance. "No, it wasna' for him that Ah didn't coom. But Ah thowt maybe ye'd ha' been so angry with him for's rudeness that ye wouldn't care to ha' seen me ageean."

"Oh, I knew you had nothing to do with that."

"That's true enoof; and Ah coom to-neight to say"—and Mat looked down on the floor and grew scarlet to the tips of his ears—"that ye mustn't be surprised if things doan't work straight here at first. Feyther's a nasty costomer when he's crossed, and there's no denying he's wild at a stranger takkin' this pleace. An' if he can do ye and yer feyther an ill turn he's not t' man to stick at it. An' if yer feyther doan't know mooch aboot farmin', ye may tell him not to tak' any advice from moine. But if ye should be in a difficulty aboot matters o' t' farm, ye can just send for me on t' quiet, and Ah'll help ye all Ah can. Ah beeant ower bright, maybe, as ye can see for yeursen, miss,

but Ah understand t' farm, and what Ah can do for ye Ah will."

Mat had strung himself up to this speech by a great effort, and he reeled it off without any sort of pause, as if it had been an article of faith that he had got by rote. Then he got up and gave a hopeless look towards the door, as if that was his goal, and he was utterly without an idea how to reach it.

Olivia rose too, and turned towards the fire. Her impulsive nature was so deeply moved by this rough but genuine friendliness, that she had no words ready to express her feelings.

There was a pause, during which she heard the shuffling of Mat's feet upon the floor as he prepared himself, with many throes, for another rhetorical effort. As she at last turned towards him and again held out her hand, he found his courage, and began—

"An' wan moor thing Ah'd loike to say, miss; doan't you be afreead o' parson Brander, for all they may say. Of coarse, ye've heard t' story; t' ill aboot a mon always cooms oot first.

Maybe t' story's true; Ah knew nowt about that. But Ah do know that there's ne'er a heart loike his in t' coontry-side. An' he's done all t' harm he'll ever do to anybody. An'—an' he give me this note for ye, miss, and Ah've given it, and noo Ah'm going. Good-night, miss."

With which abrupt farewell he made a countryman's obeisance to her, and sheered off with great promptitude.

"Good-night. I shan't forget what you've said," Olivia called after him, smiling.

She sat down again to muse by the fire, holding the open letter still in her hand; and after a few minutes, being utterly tired out with the day's work, she fell asleep. When she woke up she could not resist an exclamation of horror, for she saw confronting her, in the dim firelight, an ugly, grinning face, the owner of which broke into a peal of hoarse laughter in enjoyment of the shock his presence caused her. Starting to her feet, Olivia woke up to the full consciousness that the ill-favoured intruder was

no other than her persecutor of two nights before. While she was gathering up her forces for a withering speech, Mr. Williams gave her a smile and a nod of friendly greeting.

" You didn't expect to see me, did you ? " he began, in a perfectly amicable tone.

" I certainly did not. Nor can I say that I wished for that—honour," answered Olivia, with what ought to have been withering sarcasm.

But Mr. Williams grinned on, entirely unmoved.

" No ; you thought you'd shut me up—choked me off for good, didn't you ? Why, I've got brambles and splinters in every finger still. But I liked you for it. Oh, I do like a girl of spirit ! Why, there isn't a girl about the place I haven't tried to annoy, and not one of them has had the pluck to round on me as you did. But, then, look at your muscle, you know," he added, admiringly.

" I'm exceedingly grateful for your admiration, and I will try to deserve it," answered Olivia, briefly.

She walked rapidly to the door, which she threw wide open with a gesture of invitation to him to go out. Mr. Williams instantly got behind an armchair.

"No, no, I know you can throw me out if you want to, but just let me stay and explain. Look what a shrimp I am compared with you. You can't mind me," pleaded he.

The sight of the little sandy man clinging to the back of the armchair, and "dodging" any movement of hers which he imagined to be threatening, caused Olivia's just indignation to merge into a strong inclination to laugh. She remained standing by the door, drawn up to her full height, and said, very drily—

"I suppose it is of no use to talk to you about the feelings of a gentleman. But perhaps you can understand this; I consider you an odious person, and I wish you to go."

"That's just the impression I wish to stay and remove," said Mr. Williams, blandly.

"You won't remove it by staying," said Miss Denison.

"As for the feelings of a gentleman," pursued he, ignoring her interpolation, "of course you are quite right. I haven't got them; I don't know what they're like, and I don't want to. I'm a hopeless little cad, if you like, though nobody but you and the parson would dare to call me so, because I'm coming into a hundred and eighty thousand pounds. Doesn't it make your mouth water—£180,000? It does make a difference, don't it, say what you like, in the way you look at a fellow?"

"It does," said Miss Denison. "It makes one shudder to think of so much money being in the hands of a person who is not competent to make a right use of half-a-crown."

"Why, I never thought of it in that light," said the gentleman, leaning over the back of the armchair, and caressing his chin musingly. "But, look here, I may marry, and she will think she knows how to make a right use of it, I'll warrant."

This speech he accompanied by a look which was meant to be full of arch meaning.

Miss Denison took no notice either of speech or look.

"Now, are you going—of your own accord?" she asked, firmly, and rather menacingly.

"I don't know how you ever expect to get married if you cut a fellow so short when he's getting near the brink of a proposal."

"Now, are you going?"

"Yes, yes," said he, hastily, as she made one step towards him; "I'm going. Though I don't see why I should be the only man turned out, when I'll bet I'm the only one with matrimonial intentions."

"You don't consider that you are the only one with the audacity to spy upon me, and to enter this house like a burglar."

"Now how did you guess that? Why, you must have been only shamming sleep, then, when I hung on to the window-sill outside, and saw you looking so invitingly like Cinderella that I was obliged to come in to get a nearer view."

Miss Denison was breathless with indignation. He continued—

“ As for spying, I’m not the only one. I’ve caught the parson prowling about here these two evenings. And, look here, of course I saw from the first you liked him better than me, and now you have heard the story about him, no doubt you think him more interesting than ever. But I don’t intend to be snubbed for a murderer. And so I tell you this, Miss Denison: if you are any more civil to him than you are to me, I’ll just spread abroad something I know and that nobody else knows, and that is: how he disposed of the body of the first poor girl who was unlucky enough to have anything to do with him. And perhaps that will stop you from being the second.”

With these words Mr. Williams came out from his place of refuge behind the armchair, and keeping at a respectful distance from the fair but stalwart arm which he had already learnt to fear, sidled out of the room with a swaggering bow. He looked back,

however, when he was safely outside the door.

"Don't lose heart," he said. "I shall make you another offer some day; perhaps half-a-dozen. They'll come to be your one amusement in this hole."

With this delightful promise, Mr. Frederick Williams opened the front door and let himself out, leaving his involuntary hostess unable to distinguish which feeling was strongest in her breast—amusement or disgust at an impudence which she might well consider unparalleled.

And that vague, insolent threat of his, what did it mean? Could he really know anything about the mystery concerning the girl Ellen Mitchell?

CHAPTER VII.

SAINT CUTHBERT'S CHURCHYARD.

THERE was no denying that the arrival of these two spirited young women had caused a great flutter among the bachelors of Rishton and its neighbourhood. For it is to be noted that if, on the one hand, the remarkable beauty of the mistress attracted the attentions of the *élite* of the male population, the rosy cheeks and saucy independence of the maid began very soon to make havoc in humbler masculine hearts, so that by the time Sunday came round, and with it the great weekly gathering time, the whole village was in a mild ferment of excitement over the prospect of a close inspection of the strangers—and in their best clothes.

The little church stood on the very summit of the hill on the slope of which one side of the village lay. Its foundations and part of its walls were very ancient; but after having been

allowed to fall into neglect and decay, it had been carefully restored, under its present vicar, into a faultlessly trim and yet picturesque little building, the fanciful grey stone tower of which could be seen from the Matherham high road, rising like a coronet above the trees which grew thickly on the crest of the hill. The churchyard was kept like a garden. One of its gates led to the Vicarage, one end of which overlooked it; a second led through fields by a long and circuitous route down to the village; the third and principal entrance opened on to a little green, well shaded by trees, on which, close under the churchyard wall, the old village stocks, green with damp and a trifle infirm from age and neglect, stolidly survived their time of active service. A long, two-storeyed cottage, green with untrimmed ivy and yew trees, which were suffered to overshadow the small windows, stood at right angles with the Vicarage, facing the green. Leaning over the wall of the front garden was a weather-beaten board, bearing the information that the cottage was "To let."

When Olivia, attended by the faithful Lucy, arrived at the church on Sunday morning, she was at once accosted by the clerk, a small and sanctimonious-looking old man, who smelt of spirits, and inducted into a seat close under the pulpit, which was, he informed her in a loud whisper, "the 'all pew.'" It was too far forward for Olivia to be able to see many of her fellow-worshippers, but one party, occupying the opposite pew to hers, could not fail to catch her eye. It consisted of two very showily dressed young women, who entered with much rustling and whispering, and were a long time settling themselves; of a much younger brother and sister, whom they hustled into a very small corner of the pew; and of Mat Oldshaw, who occupied the outside seat, and who appeared to be bashfully conscious the whole time of Miss Denison's presence, though he never once dared to look in her direction.

Olivia was one of the first of the congregation to arrive, and in the interval before the service commenced she could not help regarding

with some interest such of her new neighbours as came within her range of vision. The Oldshaw family, with the exception of Mat, she knew she should not like, but in a large pew in front of them sat a lady whose appearance attracted her greatly. She was not very young or very pretty ; she was dressed with great simplicity in a dark costume and a long sealskin jacket ; and the word by which a stranger would have described her was "lady-like." It was impossible to help contrasting her with the two fidgety women behind ; and Olivia was growing more and more sure that she should like to know her, when, to her surprise, she suddenly heard a loud, hoarse whisper, "Here, gee up, Soosan," and looking round, she saw the quiet-looking lady move up the pew at the behest of the odious Frederick Williams.

As Olivia turned her head, she met this young man's admiring eyes turned upon her with their usual vacant stare. He was attired this morning like the "swell" of the comic scenes of a pantomime, the salient points of his

costume being an overcoat lined with otter, a pink-striped shirt, light gaiters, and brick-coloured gloves. Olivia fancied also that he had had his hair curled. He bestowed upon Miss Denison a nod, a smile, and a wink, and appeared quite unabashed by the fact that she vouchsafed him no sign of recognition in return. He ensconced himself in the outer corner of the pew, and watched her persistently until a heavy and measured tread up the aisle, followed by short, pattering steps, announced two new comers, and he had to make way for an elderly couple whom Olivia rightly guessed to be his parents.

Not that they bore any but the faintest family likeness to Olivia's dashing admirer. The gentleman was an erect and handsome man of sixty or more, pompous and dignified; his wife was short, stout, good-humoured-looking, and well dressed. Just as she noticed these facts the church bells ceased ringing, and a small choir of surpliced boys came out of the vestry, followed by Mr. Vernon Brander.

"Isn't he a dear?" Miss Denison heard one of the fidgety ladies whisper to the other, enthusiastically.

Mr. Brander conducted the service with no assistance but that of the choir and the clerk, who was evidently a privileged person; for he put everybody out who was within a dozen feet of his nasal voice. Olivia was impressed by the sermon, but she was hardly sure whether the impression was altogether favourable. For the preacher did not speak "as one having authority," but rather as the servant than the teacher of his hearers; as one who was bound to keep them in mind of truths which they knew already, rather than as one who held up their duty before them with all the weight of a respected and honoured pastor.

When the service was over, Olivia lingered a little in the churchyard, looking at the grave-stones, not unwilling to give the much-discussed Mr. Brander an opportunity of proving that no rumours could affect her behaviour to one who had been kind to her; but he would not avail

himself of it. On coming out of the church, which he did with extraordinarily little delay, Mr. Brander seemed purposely to avoid glancing towards the spot where she was standing, but at once, with quick steps, made for the gate at which the lady, whose appearance had attracted Olivia, was waiting. Her party, including the ill-mannered Frederick, had gone, as they had come, without her.

Olivia, who, like all young girls, could see a great deal without looking, knew that the clergyman and the lady were talking about her, and she would not pass out at the gate while they stood there. So she continued her inspection of the tombstones, with a heart beating rather faster than usual, for the very few minutes that the *tête-à-tête* lasted. Now, surely, she might have a chance of speaking to him; in common civility he would come, if only, as his note expressed it, "as his brother's representative," to ask how she was getting on with her furnishing, and whether her friends were coming soon to relieve her of her responsibilities. He passed

quite near to her on his way to the Vicarage gate. She raised her head with a smile and a heightened colour, ready to give him her prettiest greeting; but he looked away with a persistency which she could no longer doubt was intentional, and it was with a blush of the deepest mortification that Olivia, whose burning eyes no longer saw inscriptions, or tombstones, or anything but a particularly tactless and unobservant clergyman, whose conduct in not allowing her to lessen her obligation to him by an expression of her gratitude was, Olivia felt, highly reprehensible. She was so hurt, so indignant, that when the pleasant-looking lady, who stood by the gate and watched her approach, made a movement forward as if to address the young stranger, Olivia turned her head away. She would give no opening to the friend of the man who had so deeply offended her.

But anger in Olivia's breast was a feeling which could not last. Before she was half-way down the hill she was sorry for her hasty action

and ashamed of her disappointment. With the exaggerated feeling of an impulsive young girl, she blamed herself as ungracious and ungrateful, and decided that the avoidance of a man as kindly and chivalrous as Mr. Brander had proved himself to be could only proceed from the most honourable motives.

The observant Lucy perhaps detected a lightening of the cloud on her young mistress's face, for at this point of the latter's reflections she broke the silence she had discreetly kept since leaving the churchyard.

"It's a lot to do to take the service here in the morning, and at St. Cuthbert's in the afternoon, and a young men's class four miles away at night, isn't it, ma'am ?" she asked, glibly.

Lucy had already collected as much local information as if she had been settled in Rishton three months, and could have enlightened Miss Denison on a good many points of local gossip if she had been encouraged to do so.

"Why, who does all that, Lucy ?"

"Mr. Brander, ma'am. He holds a meeting

of colliers belonging to some pit at night, and he says ‘he goes to them because they wouldn’t all come to him.’”

Olivia looked at her in astonishment. Here was the little maid quoting with perfect confidence the clergyman’s own words.

“But how did you pick up all this information?”

“Oh, one hears things, ma’am,” said Lucy, who was an inveterate gossip, but who did not care to own that butcher, grocer, old woman at the village shop, nay, even the small boy who brought the afternoon ha’porth of milk from Mrs. Briggs’, who kept a cow at the other end of the village, all were laid under contribution to keep her well informed. “And they do say, Miss Olivia, that the difference between St. Cuthbert’s Church and this is something which must be seen to be believed,” she added.

Miss Denison said nothing to this. She herself was longing to see St. Cuthbert’s, and would have found out the place and gone to service there that very afternoon if a feeling of shyness

had not restrained her. Church once a day had always been enough for her at Streatham ; therefore it could only be curiosity which was urging her to break through her custom now, she said to herself. So she stayed at home that afternoon, and wrote reluctantly enough to her father to tell him that everything was ready for the arrival of the rest of the family. If only Mrs. Denison would take it into her head that the air of Yorkshire was too keen for her sensitive frame, and would allow papa to come without her, what a happy life they two might lead together, thought Olivia. She loved her easy-going father passionately, and as passionately resented the subjection in which he was kept by his second wife ; but her Utopian dream was not to be fulfilled. On the Wednesday following she received a long letter from her step-mother, announcing that they would all arrive next day, and giving rambling but minute directions as to the preparation for their coming.

Olivia put down the letter with a sigh, called Lucy, and in a doleful voice informed her that

the reign of peace and freedom was nearly over.
The little maid's face fell.

"Lor, Miss Olivia, how she will fuss and worrit, to make up for not being able to get at us for a week!" was her first comment.

"Well, we must try to give her no cause," said Olivia, trying to keep grave.

"She'd find cause to grumble, miss, if she was in heaven, and we was all angels a-flyin' about of her errands. I'll warrant before she's been in the house ten minutes she'll take a fancy to the scullery for her bedroom, and say that we ought to have made this room the coal-cellar," said Lucy, with ill-humour that was not all affected.

There was enough truth in the girl's comic sketch for Olivia to give a sigh at the prospect, though she stifled it instantly, and started briskly on a tour of the house to see whether she had left any loophole for complaints on the part of her step-mother. She could find none. She had prepared the largest and best room for her father and Mrs. Denison; the next best for the two

children ; the third in order of merit she had fitted up as the spare room, leaving only two little rooms scarcely larger than cupboards, the one for herself, and the other for her brother Ernest, on his rare visits. The two rooms in the wing she left unappropriated and untouched, not from any superstitious scruples, for she would have liked the larger one for herself ; but she knew that if she were to take possession of it, her step-mother would certainly never cease “ nagging ” at her for helping herself to so spacious a room.

Thursday morning came, and Olivia rose with a doleful sense that the fun and freedom of the week were nearly over. Her energies had found delightful vent in the unaccustomed work and responsibility ; she began to feel that even if she had been still in the old home at Streatham, a contented return to lawn-tennis and crewel work would have been impossible. Would Mrs. Denison, who was lazy as well as fretful, and who would now have to do without a house-keeper, be inclined to trust her with the reins of management ? As Olivia had always until now

been known to have the utmost horror of any household duties, she was not without a hope that, if she kept secret the change in her own feelings, Mrs. Denison might herself make some such proposal, being amiably anxious to make those around her feel as acutely as she did herself the alteration in the family fortunes.

They were to arrive about six o'clock. Olivia, who was only anxious to see her father, would not go to meet them. She would get old papa all to himself in the evening, and have a long talk, and tell him all her adventures. He was not himself while within range of the querulous voice and cold eyes of his second wife. Olivia thought she would have a very early dinner and a long walk to brace herself for her fall from autocracy. So at two o'clock she was on the Sheffield Road, walking fast against a keen wind, under a leaden sky that promised snow within a few hours. She did not care for that. Protected by a hooded waterproof and a thick pair of boots, the healthy girl was quite ready to do battle with rain, snow, or wind; and

the object of her walk was quite interesting enough for her to think little of the cold.

Olivia was going to St. Cuthbert's. She knew where the church was. She had seen its dilapidated, patched-up tower, a very marvel of make-shift architecture, far away on the plain below her as she walked to Matherham by the longest and prettiest road. After walking for about a mile and a half along this road, which was on high ground, and afforded a wide view of hill and plain, she had only to turn to the left and descend the hill by a steep and narrow lane, and walk on until she came to it. A feeling of shyness brought the bright blood to the girl's cheeks as she turned into the lane. She hoped she should not meet Mr. Brander. The whisper of one of the Misses Oldshaw in church on Sunday had made known that it was the fashion among a section of the village ladies to worship him; and Miss Denison, having always held "curate adorers" in stern and lofty contempt, was most anxious not to be confounded with that class. It was just the time, however, when she

thought an active clergyman would be going his rounds in the parish.

She had indeed met no one the whole way except a lame tramp, who was approaching her along the Sheffield Road as she turned into the lane. The whole country-side seemed to be asleep, except for the occasional distant shriek of a railway engine as it disappeared between the hills a mile away.

At last Olivia drew near to the church and the Vicarage, standing together, with no other buildings near, on a slightly rising ground in the centre of the plain. The Vicarage came first. It was a large, plain, hideous house, like a great stone box, sheltered by no ivy and no trees, with an uncared-for square of garden in front of it, and a plain stone wall all round. Only three of the windows in the front part of the house were curtained; the rest were blank and bare, as if the place had been uninhabited. Close to the garden wall came the churchyard, a mildewed wilderness in which broken and displaced headstones had been suffered to take

what positions they pleased, and lay flat, or stood sideways, or leaned against each other without hindrance. The church itself was the most extraordinary pile Olivia had ever seen. It was built of stone, and very, very old and ruinous. But no care, no taste, no skill, had been for years employed in its restoration. As harm came to it from wear or weather, it had simply been repaired in the cheapest and speediest way with whatever substance came first to hand. Thus, the glass of one window having been irretrievably damaged, had been replaced by bricks, which filled up the blank spaces between the scarcely injured tracery. In the early years of the century, a storm had brought down the central tower, which in its fall had crashed through the roof of the south aisle, breaking through the outer wall and making one-third of the whole church an almost shapeless ruin. As that storm had left it, so through sixty years it had remained, with only this difference, that the shattered tower had been brought up to the height of a few feet above the roof with

irregular layers of wood and brick and stone, and surmounted by a pointed roof of slate ; while the spaces between the arches on the southern side of the nave had been bricked up to form an outer wall to the church, leaving the ruined aisle outside exposed to every chance of wind and weather. At the south-east corner a portion of the roof, no longer either very solid or very safe, still kept in its place. At the south-west angle a rough hole in the ground and a dozen rude and broken steps had formerly led into a small crypt with a vaulted roof, which extended about half-way under the southern aisle ; but the opening having, not without reason, been declared dangerous, had been filled up, ten years ago, with bricks and stones and earth, over which the grass and weeds had now grown.

The gate of the churchyard was locked ; but Olivia was not going to be deterred by such an obstacle from the closer inspection her curiosity craved. Choosing a place where the high stone wall had irregularities on its rough surface large enough to afford a footing, she climbed to

the top, and let herself down with a jump among the gravestones on the other side. The three doors of the church were also locked ; this she had expected. She made the tour of the building very slowly, trying to decipher the dates on the weather-beaten head-stones. Before she had gone half-way round, the snow, which had been threatening all day, began to fall in large flakes, so that, by the time she had again reached the ruined aisle, Olivia was glad to take shelter under the remaining bit of the old roof. This formed a very complete place of refuge, for a sort of inner buttress had been formed with some of the loose stones which supported the remaining portions of wall and roof, and made the enclosed corner safe from wind or rain. She was debating whether it would not be wiser to make the best of her way home at once, in spite of the snow, before the short day began to draw in, when she heard the key turn in the lock of the gate, and, peeping between the stones, saw the Reverend Vernon Brander enter, and leaving

the gate open behind him, disappear round the west end of the church. From his grave, stern, absorbed expression, Olivia guessed that he was unaware of the presence of another human being. In a few minutes she heard the rattle of the key in the lock of the north-west door of the church, and then Mr. Brander's tread on the stone floor inside.

Olivia did not wish to meet him. She decided to wait a few minutes, in case he should only have gone in to fetch something ; she could hear him walking about, opening the ventilators of some of the windows and closing those of others ; then for a few minutes she heard no further sound. She would escape now, while he was engaged inside. Just as she was drawing the hood over her hat, preparing for a smart walk back through the snow, she caught sight of another figure at the gate, whom she recognised as the lame tramp she had seen near the entrance of the lane. He was a man whose age it was impossible to determine, with coarse features, and an expression

not devoid of intelligence. He had a wooden leg, and walked, moreover, with the aid of a stick.

Olivia was so much struck by the expression of vivid interest and curiosity with which he scanned every object round him, from the shambling tower above to the gravestones at his feet, that, instead of coming out from her shelter, she remained watching him, convinced that the place had some special interest for him. That interest her mind connected, with a lightning flash of vivid perception, with the story of Nellie Mitchell's disappearance. The man came towards the ruined aisle, treading more slowly and cautiously with every step, and gradually turning his attention entirely to the ground on which he trod. He did not come so far as the roofed corner, but suddenly turned his steps back in the direction of the blocked-up entrance to the crypt. Against the roughly piled stones he struck his stick sharply, with an abrupt exclamation in a loud and grating voice.

Just at the moment he uttered this, Mr. Brander appeared round the western corner. His pale face turned to a livid colour and his lips twitched convulsively at sight of the man, whom he appeared instantly to recognise. The tramp, on his side, took matters much more lightly. Saluting the clergyman with a touch of his cap, he said, in a voice which became hoarse in his endeavour to make it mysterious—

“Eh, Mester Brander, but it’s a long time since we’ve met. Eleven year come next seventh of July.”

Olivia held her breath; the seventh of July was the date of Nellie Mitchell’s disappearance. She would have given the world to run away, to escape hearing what she knew must be a confession; but there was no way out except by passing the two men. Brave as she was, Olivia dared not face them. She shrank back in her corner and vainly tried not to hear.

CHAPTER VIII.

A HALF-HEARD SECRET.

THERE was a long pause after the tramp had addressed Mr. Brander. In spite of herself, Olivia found herself at last holding her breath with impatience to hear the clergyman's answer. She would not look at him, although through the gaps in the rough stonework she might easily have done so; but her hands, with which she had at first tried to stop her ears, fell down at her sides. When at last he spoke, Mr. Brander's voice was low and husky, affected by some strong feeling.

“Yes, Abel, it’s a long time—a very long time.”

The blood rushed to Olivia’s face, and her cold hands stole together; there was something in the vicar’s voice which told so clearly of years of keen suffering that a great throb of pity wrung the girl’s heart; and she hoped, as eagerly as if

the matter affected her personally, that this tramp would keep his secret.

"Ay," said Abel, in whose tones, to do him justice, there was no malignity. "Ah've kept ma word, parson. Ah promised ye that neeight as Ah'd go on straight wi'out resting hereabouts. An' on Ah went, and Ah nivver said nowt, and Ah've nivver been nigh t' please from that day to this. Now that's straight dealin', parson, arn't it?"

"Yes, Abel; I always knew you for a straight man."

Mr. Brander spoke gravely and appreciatively, but there was no undue humility in his tone, as of a man demanding mercy. Abel resumed.

"Ay, parson, so I be. Ah'm not mooch of a Christian, as tha knaws, an' if so be a mon treats ma ill, Ah loike to be even wi' him. But if so be a mon treats ma fair, Ah treat him fair back. An' tha's treated ma more nor fair, parson, mony's the time. An' so, when tha says, 'Shut tha mooth an' mak' no guesses, Ah shuts ma mooth, an' Ah doan't guess nowt.'

"What brings you here now, then?" asked Mr. Brander, abruptly, with perceptible anxiety in his tone.

"Well, parson, tha knaws Ah wur born and bred hereabouts. An' though Ah been fond o' trampin' it i' ma time, Ah'm not so spry-like as Ah wur, an' Ah'd like to settle in t'pleace where Ah wur bred."

"You've saved some money, then?" asked Mr. Brander, as sharply as before.

"Not so mooch, not so mooch, mester, but Ah doan't count to end ma days in an eight-roomed villa, like t' gentlefowk."

There was a pause, and then the vicar spoke in a constrained tone, in which the effort to repress some strong feeling was more manifest than ever.

"And if I ask you not to settle here, Abel, but to pitch your tent for the remainder of your days somewhere else, what would you do? Come, I don't want to throw in your face what I've done for you, but what would you do?"

Olivia heard the man clearing his throat

undecidedly, and kicking with his wooden leg against the gravestones.

“ You doan’t trust ma, parson, an’ it’s a bit hard, after howdin’ ma tongue nigh eleven year. Eh, but if Ah’d wanted to ha’ spoke, wadn’t Ah ha spoke afore now? ”

“ If you had wanted to speak about the business, I should never have wasted my breath asking you not to,” said Mr. Brander, with decision. “ I trust you, Abel, as much as one man may trust another. But judging you as I should judge myself, I say it would be impossible for you to live in this neighbourhood, where that night’s occurrences are still continually being raked up and discussed, without its leaking out that you were here on that night, and that you met me. That, as you know, I wish to keep secret.”

“ But, parson,” began the man slowly, in a troubled tone——

Mr. Brander interrupted him.

“ Now we’ve nothing further to discuss, Abel, I want the whole story forgotten.”

“ But it’s not a whole story, Mester Brander,

an' that's why it nivver will be forgotten. It's a mystery to all but—to ivverybody; an' until t' fowk knew what become o' Nellie Mitchell, a mystery it'll be, an' they'll talk abaht it. Why, parson, dost knew t' tales as goes round?"

"What do tales matter as long as they are only idle ones?" said Mr. Brander, hastily. "Now, Abel Squires, which is it to be? Is the parson to have his way, or has he been wasting his breath?"

"He maun ha' his way, Ah reckon; but Ah tell tha, parson, it's all no use. It'll be none o' ma doin', but—murder will aht, tha knaws."

He dropped his voice to a low, portentous whisper for the last words.

"Murder!" echoed Mr. Brander, also in a low voice. "What are you talking about? Didn't I tell you it was not murder?"

"Ay, that tha did," said Abel, rather drily.

"And did you see anything?"

"Well, not that neeght, but next day——"

"Ah!" ejaculated Mr. Brander, sharply.

"Then you didn't keep your word: you didn't go straight on!"

The man's answer came deliberately.

"Ah went straight on that neeight, mester, as Ah towd tha Ah would. But Ah coom back next mornin'. It wur only human natur'; an' Ah took a look round. Ay, parson, Ah hid summat as would ha towd a tale."

"What was that?" asked Mr. Brander, slowly, and, as it seemed, with difficulty.

"There wur marks on those steps down to t' crypt as is now blocked oop. An' down at t' bottom. An' Ah tramped 'em aht. An' there war marks in another pleace as Ah made away. An' it wur all for ye, parson, for Ah thowt of what ye'd done for ma when Ah wur ill and nobody to care for ma, an' Ah did what Ah could."

"You're a good fellow, Abel," said Mr. Brander, huskily, after a few moments' pause. "And you've been a good friend to me."

"Ah, Mester Brander, but Ah'd ha liked to ha' served ye a better way," said the man, who seemed affected in his turn.

The vicar silenced him with a peremptory "Sh-sh." Then he said—

"You won't be able to get far to-night on foot. It will be snowing heavily in an hour from now. You must get home by train to-night."

Olivia guessed that he must have put money into the man's hand, for Abel Squires answered reluctantly—

"Ah doan't tak' it for howding ma tongue, parson. But if ye want ma to go further, it's but fair ye should pay for it. Here's good-day to you sir, and may you nivver——"

The voices were growing fainter. Olivia peeped between the stones for the first time, and saw that the oddly assorted couple were making their way among the ruined gravestones to the gate, where the vicar shook hands with the tramp, who went back up the lane towards the Sheffield Road as fast as his wooden leg would let him. Mr. Brander stood at the gate until long after Abel had disappeared from sight at a bend of the lane. His back was towards Olivia, and all that

she could see was that he remained extraordinarily still. The snow, which from a few feathery flakes had gradually thickened into a blinding storm, grew at last so dense that no mental abstraction could shut it out. The vicar suddenly threw back his head, and apparently taking in the fact that he was getting wet through, gave himself a violent shake to get rid of the white covering which already enveloped him, turned and walked rapidly back to the church.

As soon as Olivia heard the rattle of the lock, she sprang out of her shelter, struggling with her umbrella as she went, hurried over the uneven ground within the ruined aisle, where a few minutes before Mr. Brander and the tramp had been standing, and steering rapidly and neatly between the broken and scattered tombstones, reached the gate in very few seconds. As she flitted quickly through, however, a gust of wind blew the skirt of her waterproof against the bars of the gate, which swung to behind her with a loud creaking noise. She ran on, and in a minute was out

of sight to any one at the church door, hidden by the churchyard wall. But Mr. Brander, hearing the noise, and being naturally rather startled by the idea that some one had been about during his very private conversation with Squires, was too quick for her. He was out of the church and on the track of the intruder before she had got many steps up the lane. She was just past the bend when he suddenly came up with her. One umbrellaed and waterproofed woman in a snowstorm is so like another that he had not the slightest idea who his quarry was until he had passed her and turned to look back. As he did so he caught sight of her face, and instantly stopped.

Olivia stopped too, and holding back her umbrella, met his glance with a frank, straight gaze. He raised his hat, seemed about to speak to her, but hesitated. She smiled, and held out her hand. He saw at once that this was not the ordinary greeting of an acquaintance she was tendering him. The muscles about her mouth were quivering, and her eyes, as

they met his for a moment, before dropping modestly, were luminous with generous feeling, maidenly shame struggling with womanly sympathy. Mr. Brander took her hand with some constraint. As he touched it, however, something in the firm clasp of the girl's fingers gave him confidence.

"Miss Denison," he said, gravely, while his keen black eyes seemed to read the thoughts in her brain before they were uttered, "you have been in the churchyard. Where were you?"

The blood, which was already crimson in Olivia's cheeks, mounted to her forehead, until her whole face was aglow. Her eyes fell, and it was in a low, almost faltering voice, that she answered—

"I was in the ruined part of the church, where the roof is left."

Mr. Brander was startled by this confession. He did not at once speak, being evidently occupied in trying to recall the very words of the conversation she must have overheard. But

he soon gave up that attempt, and asked, impatiently--

“Then you heard—what?”

Olivia’s breath came almost in sobs, as she answered at once, with bent head, and almost in a whisper--

“I heard nearly all you said—you and the man. I am very, very sorry and ashamed, and I ask your pardon. But I did not dare to come out while you were there. I hoped to get away without your seeing me.”

“But what did I say? What did he say? What did you understand by it all?” asked he, so eagerly that he almost seemed to be bullying her.

“Oh, I don’t know. Pray don’t ask me. I don’t want to remember. I would rather forget it all. I never meant that a word about it should pass my lips, and it will not after this,” said she, hurriedly, without looking up.

Mr. Brander said nothing to this at first, and Olivia, raising her head to steal a look at his face, judged by his expression that he

was in the throes of some terrible mental struggle, the outcome of which would be some passionate outburst. But he recovered command of himself, and when he at last spoke to her, it was in a very quiet voice.

“I am keeping you standing in the snow, Miss Denison; I must not do that. But we must come to a word of understanding now; it will put us on a right footing for the future.”

“ You need not say another word to me, Mr. Brander,” interrupted Olivia, vehemently. “ The understanding between us is clear enough; you are a most warm-hearted gentleman, and have shown me more delicate kindness than I ever received in my life; I am, and shall be as long as you let me, your grateful friend. What understanding do you want more than that? ”

Her clear young voice rang out with enthusiastic warmth, which threw the clergyman off his balance. He began to tremble like a leaf, and again his thin, mobile face showed

signs of emotion within him. But he still kept it under restraint, and spoke in a perfectly steady voice.

"Thank you; I expected generosity from you. But—do you quite understand the position I am in, I wonder? Did you understand that man—that tramp—is keeping a secret for me?"

"Yes," answered Olivia, steadily.

"And you are aware of its nature?"

The girl drew a deep breath, but she answered bravely, though in a low voice, "Yes."

"And after that, and after hearing everything that you have heard, that you must have heard, about this miserable story, you still are ready to call yourself—my friend?"

He kept his voice at the same quiet pitch, but on the last two words it broke a little. There was a pause of only a few seconds.

Then Olivia answered in a veritable whisper, but with the same sweet and dignified seriousness, "Yes, Mr. Brander."

She might reasonably have expected some acknowledgment of the gracious, womanly daring of this speech; but instead of giving any sign of gratitude, Mr. Brander, to her astonishment, turned upon her quite sharply.

"Well, that's Quixotic, illogical, pretty, perhaps, from a boarding-school young lady's point of view, but not worthy of a woman of sense."

Olivia was surprised, but she was true woman enough to have her answer.

"I think I can justify it," she said, holding her head back rather obstinately.

"Very well. Justify yourself for being ready to make friends with a man believed to have committed a very atrocious and cowardly murder."

Olivia looked at him full and earnestly.

"I don't believe——" she began.

"You don't believe what?"

"That you—ever—did it."

"Because I have the assurance to take the

bull by the horns, waylay you, and insist upon coming to an explanation?"

"No—o, not because of that."

"Why, then?"

Olivia continued to gaze at him as solemnly as if she had been a judge passing sentence.

"It is very difficult to say quite why," she began, deliberately. "They say women hardly ever can say why they believe a thing."

"Is that all your answer?"

"No," she replied, rather sharply, beginning to be a little annoyed at the irony in his tone. "They have never proved it, for one thing, although they tried. And—how can a man have changed so in ten years?"

"The first is a reason; the other is not. But you have just seen with your own eyes the only witness to my actions on that night, and heard with your own ears that he has not been in the neighbourhood since."

Olivia assented.

"Then you say, 'How can a man have changed so much in ten years?' But I tell

you I have changed so much in that time that, except for externals, I might pass for a different man. Now what becomes of your reasons for thinking me innocent? ”

“ I will believe you did it if you tell me so, of course,” said Olivia, quietly.

“ And what then? ”

“ What then? I shall be sorry again, and puzzled.”

“ And you will withdraw all those pretty professions of friendship? ”

Olivia debated with herself for a few moments only. Then she answered, vehemently, in a strong voice—

“ No. You were my friend—a very good friend too—before I heard anything against you. You were good to us, as I hear you are good to everybody. When you met that man in the churchyard just now, you spoke like a brave man, and not like a coward. I hear from every one about the noble, self-denying life you lead. If you didn’t do it you are almost a martyr; if—if you did, you are expiating what

you did in a manner which justifies our respect. Now if you call these women's reasons, I don't care ; they are good enough for me, Mr. Brander."

"And for me, too, Miss Denison. I——"

He tried to keep his voice under proper command. But educated to self-control by long years as he was, he gave way under the unexpected rush of warm and generous feeling. A choking in his throat checked his utterance ; his keen eyes grew moist and dim. He saw, as in a mist, a hand held out to him, and seizing it, he wrung it in a pressure which made Olivia wince.

"Look here," he said at last, in a voice still husky, while he continued to hold her fingers in a strong, nervous clasp, "I have nothing to say to you : no confession, no explanation, nothing. But you are a grand girl—a grand girl."

He released her hand suddenly, as if with an effort, and then at once struggled into his usual manner.

"You're half frozen with standing in the

cold (a very just penalty for eavesdropping, by the way), and you'll be half buried before you get back. I must see you home."

"Oh, no, indeed, I'm not going to drag you all that way on a day like this."

"But I choose to be dragged. You rash young woman, accustomed to the peaceful security of Streatham: you must learn that it is not safe for a young lady to tramp about this part of the world alone so late in the day."

"But it's not late."

"It will be dark before you get home. Go on up the hill, and I will fetch my mackintosh and overtake you."

He went into his bare-looking house while Olivia tramped on obediently. She had not noticed, until then, how thickly the snowflakes were falling, nor how the gloom of the leaden sky was deepening. Now, too, she became aware, for the first time, that her jaws were stiff, and her hands and feet bitterly cold; for the interview with Mr. Brander had been too exciting to allow her to notice these things. He

overtook her in a very few minutes, and walked by her side, conversing on different topics, until that scene by the churchyard scarcely seemed a reality. They passed only one person, a rough-looking collier of unsteady gait, whom Mr. Brander made use of to point a moral.

“Now, is that the sort of person you would care to meet if you were alone?” he asked.

“I shouldn’t have been afraid of him,” answered Olivia.

“No; if he had been sober he would have been vastly afraid of you. And to most girls I should say:—So he is when he’s drunk. But your courage doesn’t want stimulating; it wants repressing. For I tell you my collier boys are good lads in the main, but there are black sheep among them as among other folk, and you mustn’t risk falling in with one towards night-fall on a lonely road. Do you hear?”

He spoke with playful peremptoriness, but Olivia understood that he was giving a serious warning, which she promised to heed. He went on talking about the colliers, who formed the

bulk of the inhabitants of his scattered parish, with affectionate interest which awakened a sympathetic curiosity in her, until they reached the inn at the entrance of Rishton village. Mr. Brander had grown so warm over what Olivia afterwards discovered to be his favourite subject that, quite unconsciously, his steps, and consequently hers, had grown slower and slower, while his voice grew more and more eager, until a passer-by would have taken them for a pair of lovers reluctant to separate. They had come to a complete standstill in the farmyard by the corner of the house, when they heard the opening of the front door, a man's footstep, and then a woman's shrill voice—

“It’s of no use looking for her, Charles. She won’t be in yet. Olivia never did care a straw for your comfort or for mine.”

Olivia turned to Mr. Brander, and held out her hand with a shake of the head.

“There,” she said, “isn’t that more eloquent than the longest description? There’ll be an end to everything now she’s come!”

Fortunately it had grown by this time so dark that under her umbrella the hot blushes which mounted to Olivia's cheeks as soon as this speech had escaped her lips could not be seen. Giving Mr. Brander her hand very hastily, and not leaving him time for something he half hesitated, but wanted to say, she turned, and with a hasty "Good-bye; thank you very much for coming," ran round towards the front of the house.

CHAPTER IX.

MRS. DENISON AT HOME.

WHEN Olivia had come as near as she could to the porch without being seen from thence, she stopped, in the hope that Mrs. Denison, who was still grumbling at her step-daughter's non-appearance, would go indoors, and give her a chance of enveloping her father in a warm hug, and of snatching a stolen interview with him unknown to the ruling powers.

In a few moments, to the girl's great delight, Mrs. Denison said, impatiently, "Well, I can't stand here in the snow just because your daughter chooses to insult me by absenting herself when I am expected."

"My dear, my dear," expostulated papa's mild tones, "Olivia is the best creature in the world. She wouldn't think of insulting you or anybody. But how could she guess we should come by an earlier train than the one we said?"

"Well, I'm not going to catch cold even for the best creature in the world, and I should advise you not to either. Are you coming in?"

"Not directly, I think, my dear. I want a little air after that stuffy railway carriage. And really, you know, those children do quarrel so——"

"If you want to go hunting for Olivia, say so; but don't put it down to the poor children," said Mrs. Denison.

And she went indoors, shutting the door with a nearer approach to a "slam" than etiquette prescribes for a lady.

No sooner was she safely inside than Olivia crept along under the lee of the house wall, and springing up the worn steps at a bound, flung down her umbrella, and threw her arms round her father's neck like a hungry young bear.

"Good gracious, my dear, you're quite wet, and as cold as ice. You must come inside and warm yourself."

"Oh, no, dear old papa—poor old papa; it's warmer here outside. With Beatrix and Regie

fighting, and mamma at freezing-point, the place must be——”

“ Now you’ve been listening ; that isn’t right.”

“ Yes, I have—all the afternoon—taking in all the private conversations I could get near enough to overhear. I find it grows upon one. But I can always tell what temper Mrs. Denison is in without any listening.”

“ Now, Olivia, I won’t hear that. Your stepmother is the best of women——”

“ Yes, papa, I know,” said Olivia, nodding gravely.

Indeed, she had heard that sentiment many scores of times, and she supposed that by constant repetition her good-natured father hoped to persuade himself that it was true.

“ And Regie and Beatrix are the best of children, aren’t they, old papa ? ” she asked, gravely.

He was quite distressed at not being able to reply truthfully in the affirmative.

“ Well,” he said, “ I’m sure they would be.

Only somehow, I don't know how it is, they seem to get a little too much indulged, I think."

"Perhaps they do. I think they want a little more of your iron rule, papa," said Olivia, who was hanging on to his arm, lovingly patting his cheek and turning up his coat collar and lavishing upon him all the caressing little attentions he loved from his adored daughter's hands.

He began to laugh; her liveliness and demonstrative affection were dispelling the gloomy forebodings which had hung upon him all day on the entrance to this new and untried life.

"You don't treat me with proper respect, Olivia. If you are going to be impudent, I shall take you indoors, and get Mrs. Denison to talk to you."

"What mortal man may dare, you dare; but you don't dare that," said his daughter, saucily. "Don't you want to know how I've got on here all by myself?"

"Yes, but I'm afraid you'll catch cold."

"No, I shan't. The excitement of this stolen meeting with the king of my heart will keep me warm. Besides, we'll go in directly. Only when we do, you know what it will be. Nag, nag—oh, no, I forgot; that word is tabooed. I should say orate, orate, until all the ills that flesh is heir to have been exhausted."

"What were you doing out on a day like this? You hadn't gone to meet us, had you?"

"No-o, I hadn't. I'd been to look at a church."

"That means that you've fallen in love with a parson."

"Papa, papa, how can you say such things—of me, too?"

"Why, my dear child, I only spoke in fun. You don't really suppose I thought so meanly of you as that?"

Olivia laughed with some constraint. If her father, who already had a prejudice against the clergy, should hear the rumours about poor Mr. Brander, nothing, short of entreaties which she

would be ashamed to use, would induce him to allow her to exchange another word with the vicar of St. Cuthbert's. And, in a neighbourhood where the social attractions were so few as at Rishton, the loss of an acquaintance capable of intelligent conversation was a serious one. She grew silent, and beginning to feel conscious of the cold, shivered. Her father instantly opened the door and led her into the house. He could hear his wife's powerful voice as she chatted with one of the servants in the dining-room. Mrs. Denison was one of those women who confide much in their servants, without extracting any confidence worth having in return. She dropped into a stony silence as her husband and his daughter entered; for there was a feud, generally covert, but none the less real, between the two ladies.

Mrs. Denison was a woman of about thirty-five, of the middle height, somewhat thick-set, with a cold face, which was not ill-looking, though she had never been strictly handsome. She drew herself up, with a displeased

expression, in the armchair she occupied by the fire ; and Olivia knew that her efforts to make the house comfortable had not met with the approval of its mistress. The girl walked the whole length of the long room with a rather rebellious feeling in her heart, which she tried to subdue, and held out her hand with the best grace she could.

"How do you do, mamma ? I hope you had a pleasant journey," she said, cordially.

Mrs. Denison gave her finger-tips, and looked at her with cold eyes.

"Quite as well as I could expect, thank you, knowing what I had to look forward to."

"I hope you don't dislike the new home already."

"Oh, when it begins to look at all like 'home,' I daresay it will be bearable enough ; but there is at least a fortnight's hard work for me before that can happen."

Olivia's face changed, and began to look proud and mutinous. Mr. Denison rushed into the breach.

"Come, come, Susan, I don't think you are quite fair to poor Olivia. Remember, it's hard work for a girl, arranging a big house like this. I think she has done very well indeed."

"You must allow me, Edward, to know what I am talking about," said his wife; while Regie and Beatrix, who had been quarrelling silently but viciously in a corner, scenting something more interesting in a possible discussion among their elders, came to an abrupt truce and listened eagerly. "I think I ought to understand the arrangement of a house by this time."

"It is a pity, Mrs. Denison, that you could not have spared Lucy and me a week of discomfort and hard work by coming here first yourself," said Olivia, whose quick temper was seldom proof against her stepmother's attacks. "I never doubted that we should fail to please you, but you might give us the credit of having tried."

"Why, what's the matter, Susan? What have you to find fault with?" asked Mr. Denison. His easy-going nature made him averse from in-

terferring in any discussion ; but he had suffered so much self-reproach for allowing his daughter to come to Rishton by herself that he felt impelled to dare a word in her behalf. "Hasn't she made the place very comfortable ? "

"She has at least taken care that she herself shall be very comfortable," said Mrs. Denison, in her most disagreeable tone.

"Will you please tell me how I have done that ? " asked Olivia, in a very low voice.

She was afraid lest her self-control should leave her, and the discussion assume the vulgar aspect of a quarrel between two angry women. For, blame herself for it as she might, she was angry as well as hurt.

"By consulting nobody's convenience but your own in your choice of a room for yourself," said Mrs. Denison, sharply.

"My bedroom!" cried the girl, with unfeigned surprise. "Why, what other could I have chosen ? It is the smallest in this side of the house, except papa's dressing-room ! "

"It is the only one that I could possibly make

into a boudoir for myself. I don't know whether you expect me to give up all the little comforts and refinements of a lady."

This speech grated on the ears of both Olivia and her father. Mr. Denison, after ten years of his second marriage, was by no means so absorbed by marital devotion as to ignore the descent he had made in taking for his second wife a woman scarcely refined enough to have been maid to his first. Being a man of affectionate temperament, fond of home, and sensitively grateful for kindness, real or supposed, it was natural that in his keen sorrow at his first wife's death he should fall a prey to the first woman, near at hand, who should find it worth her while to capture him. This, in the natural course of things, proved to be his daughter's governess.

The clever, superficially educated daughter of a small provincial shopkeeper, the second Mrs. Denison, on her elevation to a rank above her birth, was determined to avail herself to the full of every privilege to which her new station entitled her. One of these privileges she conceived

to be the possession of a "boudoir," though what the precise significance of it was to her it was not easy to see, as she entered it very rarely, while the whole house was not large enough for her to "sulk" in. But in overlooking this necessity of her station, Mrs. Denison chose to consider that Olivia had wished to put upon her a slight of the kind she could least brook, and no pains the girl had taken in other directions could induce her to overlook the indignity.

Again Mr. Denison, with unusual rashness, stepped in.

"My dear Susan," he expostulated, "Olivia must have a room to sleep in. And there must be a spare room kept for Ernest. Where else could she stow herself?"

"There are two good rooms in the wing——" began Mrs. Denison.

"But, my dear, they are damp and full of mouldy old things that——"

He was interrupted in his turn by his daughter.

"I haven't the least objection to sleeping in

the wing, papa. I left those rooms untouched for Mrs. Denison to decide what she would have done with them. I will take the large room with pleasure, mouldy old things and all."

In truth, Olivia was pleased with this arrangement, and she took possession of the room which had once been Ellen Mitchell's with alacrity which she did her best to hide from her step-mother. Nobody had told Mrs. Denison the story about those two rooms; but their decayed and desolate appearance had inspired her with a strong prejudice against them, so that Olivia was allowed to keep not only the bedroom, but the outer room as well for her own use. Mr. Denison was strongly opposed to the idea of his beautiful daughter sleeping away from the rest of the household in what he called "a wretched old rat-run." But as the two feminine wills were both against his, he could do nothing but stipulate emphatically that fires were to be kept up in both rooms throughout the winter. His wife demurred at the expense, but on this point he was firm, and had his own way.

In the jarring family life which the Denison household led under the presidency of the second wife, Olivia found a great relief in being able to shut herself up in her wing, away from all discordant elements, even though the atmosphere of these two rooms remained to the end heavy with the tragedy of their late occupant. That tragedy the young girl grew more and more anxious fully to know about; so she turned over the leaves of the old books, and read again the inscription in faded ink in the old prayer-book: "Ellen Mitchell, from her affectionate brother Ned." What had become of "Ned"? Did the "affectionate brother" know that his sister had been spirited away, leaving no trace? These were conjectures which often passed through Olivia's mind as she sat down for a lazy half-hour by her fire at bed-time.

This half-hour was now the only idle time in Olivia's day. Like many other idle English girls, she had only wanted something to do to develop the most dashing energy; and as Mrs. Denison was too much enervated by long years of laziness

to care for the trouble of housekeeping, Olivia flung herself with ardour into these new duties, and found in them that necessary outlet for her energies which she had previously sought in lawn tennis.

The whole family had been settled at Rishton Hall a week, and Mrs. Denison had begun bitterly to complain that nobody had called upon her, when one afternoon, while Olivia was busy in the dining-room with the children's clothes, and her stepmother was shut up in her boudoir with a novel, a carriage drove up to the door, and a footman, descending from the box, gave such a thundering knock as made the old door creak on its hinges. Olivia could just see from where she sat that the carriage was very large, that the footman was very tall, and that the horses were showy animals, their heads held well back with the bearing-rein. That was enough for her. She loved horses, and the bearing-rein was an abomination in her eyes.

“Those parvenus,” she said to herself, haughtily.

And when Lucy came to announce that Mrs. and Miss and Mr. Frederick Williams were in the drawing-room, she said, briefly, "Tell Mrs. Denison, Lucy," without looking up, or pausing in her work.

She knew this was wrong. She knew that she ought to go and entertain the visitors during the ten minutes which Mrs. Denison would certainly devote to self-adornment before going down to the drawing-room. But besides that she felt, in her new burst of house-managing fervour, the giving and receiving of visits to be a frivolity, Olivia was resolved not to cultivate any intimacy with the family of the odious Frederick. So she worked on, feeling guilty but defiant, until she heard Mrs. Denison's heavy and pompous tread upon the stairs. A few minutes later, the drawing-room door opened again, and Olivia heard the whole party come out to be shown over the house.

"You shall see what I have made of the upstairs rooms first," said Mrs. Denison's voice, "and make the acquaintance of my cherubs."

And to Olivia's delight, they streamed upstairs towards the room where the cherubs could be distinctly heard screaming with all their might. She gave a sigh of relief at this respite, and was turning over a small stocking on her hand to see what mending it needed, when there came a little timid, hesitating knock at the door.

"Come in," said she, feeling instantly sure the knock was that of a complete stranger.

The door was opened by the pleasant-looking lady whom Olivia had noticed in church. She had a diffident blush on her face, and a deprecating smile, which made her look pleasanter than ever. Olivia rose, and the lady hurried forward.

"No, don't get up. Don't make me feel I've disturbed you," she entreated. "I know I've taken a dreadful liberty, but I caught sight of you in here as we came in, and I'm so devouringly anxious to know you that when Mrs. Denison offered to take us all upstairs, I slipped behind to try to get a peep at you."

Olivia was disarmed. Miss Williams took a chair beside her, and looked with interest at the work in her hand.

"I could show you such a much better way of mending that heel if you'd let me," she said, almost with eagerness.

"Oh, if you're what they call 'clever with your needle' I mustn't work before you," said the girl, smiling. "I'm only a beginner at anything useful, and I bungle frightfully over everything at present."

"But you want to learn?" asked the lady, quite earnestly.

"Indeed I do. We haven't enough servants now to do everything; and unless I learn to give real help in the house—not mere amateurish dabbling, you know—half the things that ought to be done will be left undone."

Miss Williams's gloves were off, and she was already busy with the small stocking. Olivia was astonished to notice that the quick, clever fingers bore distinct traces, both in shape and texture, of former hard work. The elder lady

glanced up, caught the girl's eyes, and blushed.

"Yes," she said, smiling, and as if telling a secret, "you would be astonished if I were to tell you of all the work these hands have done in their time. Now that my father has got on, and married a lady, all that has to be forgotten. But oh! if the servants knew, when I tell them the hall has not been properly scrubbed, how I long to be down on my knees doing it myself!"

She was in earnest, but there was such a twinkle of fun in her eyes that Olivia, who liked her more and more every minute, joined her in a burst of laughter. Then Olivia remembered that there was a bond of union between them; and she said, in a confidential tone—

"You have a stepmother, too, then?"

"Yes, and no. Mrs. Williams is my father's second wife, and I am the child of his first. My own mother was"—she looked round her with mock mystery—"a factory lass. And—and so was I till I was fourteen. Then my father made

a discovery, and began to grow rich and ambitious. And my mother died—perhaps luckily for her, poor thing—and he buried her and the old life together. But he could not bury me, you know; and if the lady he then married had not had the sweetest disposition in the world, it might have fared ill with me. But she is a kind creature, and she made my civilisation as little irksome to me as possible. And that is why stepmother doesn't seem the right name for her; and there is all my autobiography."

All the time her busy fingers were making the needle fly through the stocking with a deftness absolutely bewildering to Olivia.

"You are luckier than I have been," said the young girl, in a low voice.

Miss Williams looked up again, her eyes beaming with sympathetic intelligence.

"Yes, I could see that. My father married up for the second time, while yours——"

"Married down. Yes, down in every way; that's the worst of it: temper, manners, everything. If she had been different, I should not

have minded growing poorer in the least, but it is tiresome to be thrown so much on her society."

"Yes, there are absolutely no suitable friends about here for you."

"Well," said Olivia, laughing, blushing, and hesitating, "I thought so till ten minutes ago."

Miss Williams in her turn flushed with pleasure. But then she shook her head.

"You might put up with me perhaps, though I am much too old for you. But my half-brother! You have met him, and snubbed him, I think, because he is always raving about your beauty and spirit. But if so, you certainly do not want to meet him again."

"Indeed, I don't," answered the girl, laughing.

"We might perhaps find a common meeting ground at the Vicarage after next week, when the vicar comes back. But I don't know how you will like Mrs. Brander," she added, very dubiously.

"Isn't she nice?" asked Olivia, with great interest.

"Oh, yes, she's very nice, and very handsome, and—and straightforward, and—and looked up to. She quite leads the fashions here, you know, and starts everything. She is not at all like the ordinary humdrum vicar's wife. But——"

"Well?"

"I don't want to talk scandal, but you must hear all the standing gossip, and you may as well hear it without venom. People talk about her and her husband's brother——"

"Mr. Vernon Brander!"

"Yes."

"He told me himself he had been in love with her before she married," said Olivia, warmly.

Miss Williams gave a quick glance at her face, making the girl blush.

"Yes, but, well, people have seen her going in and out of his house since, and late, very late, in the evening. I should not have told you

these things, only they must make a difference in the way one looks upon people."

"From your manner towards Mr. Vernon Brander, I shouldn't have thought they made any difference," said Olivia, who was much excited.

"Ah, that is the privilege of being an old maid," answered Miss Williams, very quietly. "I can do without fear what a young girl cannot do—make friends with a black sheep."

Olivia started.

"Do you think he is guilty, then?" she asked, in a startled whisper.

Miss Williams, who had risen, looked very grave.

"Of the other charge? I don't know. I would give my right hand to know that it was not so. For I am so much interested in him—I may even say, so fond of him. I know, from what he has told me, that his inner life is one long storm, one long struggle. But, why doesn't he clear himself if he can? To an old friend like me three words would be enough."

"Then you believe——"

"Why does he accept the position? Why does he come to me and ask me to do what I can to help you in your loneliness?"

Olivia looked up.

"That is what he did last Sunday," continued Miss Williams. "And he alluded to 'his unfortunate position' as putting a barrier between you and any wish he might have to assist you. Why should he speak like that if he knew himself to be innocent of either charge?"

Olivia was silent. She did not care to let the other lady see how deeply this matter affected her. She was indeed surprised at the keenness of her own feeling. It was a great relief to her that at that moment voices were heard at the top of the staircase, and Miss Williams jumped up, saying that she would have to excuse herself for playing truant. Olivia shook hands with her almost mechanically, and promised to go to see her without knowing what she said. As soon as she was left alone, the

young girl abandoned her work, and sat staring before her in most unusual idleness. One sentence was ringing in her ears :

“ Why didn’t he clear himself if he could ? ”

And to this question it was impossible to suggest an answer.

CHAPTER X.

THE “FIGHTING PARSON.”

ANY one who could have seen into the workings of Olivia Denison’s heart and mind when she was left to herself would probably have pronounced her to be “in love” with the Reverend Vernon Brander. This was not quite true. She did indeed feel a very strong interest in the hermit vicar and his mysterious history; and such interest in a young girl’s mind cannot exist quite apart from sentiment. But then, the sentiments awakened by the overheard interview in the churchyard and by Miss Williams’s suggestions were so largely mingled with doubt, disgust, and horror, that on the whole she felt she would infinitely prefer, in spite of his kindness, never to meet him again. She felt very thankful, however, as the days went by, that no story and no rumours about

the vicar of St. Cuthbert's reached Mrs. Denison's ears. That lady was too much wrapt up in herself to trouble herself much about her neighbours; and beyond expressing great indignation that he had not called upon her, she expressed no great interest in the vicar's deputy.

Olivia was taking to the country life with much zest. Besides her household duties, she found time to occupy herself greatly with the live stock on the farm, and to take the poultry under her especial care. Mat Oldshaw used to slip round, on one pretence or another, in the early morning when she was busy with her poultry, and, leaning over the fence, used to give her advice about the management of them, trying to check her extravagance.

“Ye doan’t need to give ‘em all that coorn, Miss Denison, now they aren’t laying,” he said to her one day reproachfully, as she distributed grain with a wildly lavish hand. “What profit will ye be likely to get if ye feed ‘em oop like that? Every egg ye’ll get this year ‘ull cost

ye twopence, and ye'll lose on every chicken ye sell."

"Well, I can't starve them just because they're not bringing in a profit just now," said the girl. "If they've any sense of gratitude they'll grow beautifully plump and fat, and sell at fancy prices."

"That there's regular lady's farming," said Mat, shaking his head dubiously. "And it's all of a piece wi' t' way t' mester's goin' to work himself. It's very pretty, but it ain't like practical work, and it doan't pay."

Olivia's bright face clouded.

"But papa's got a farm bailiff," said she.

"Oh ay, and gotten a rat to eat oop his coorn," assented Mat, darkly.

"Do you mean to insinuate," began Olivia with a tragic face, "that Tom Herrick——"

"All Ah mean, Miss, is that Ah'd like to see ye mak' a profit on your hens; for that's what Ah call success, and Ah'd loike ye to be successful, that Ah should."

"Thank you, Mat; it's very kind of you.

And you're quite right ; of course it's only by making every department pay that one can make the farm pay."

" Ay," said Mat. " And if ye'll but follow aht what Ah say, ye'll be able to keep twice them lot o' hens on what ye're givin' 'em. Ye've got ground for fifty more, and if Ah was you, Ah'd go over to Long Sedge Bend and buy some of old Widder Lund's ; she's got 'em to sell. And doan't ye go giving her no fancy price, but beat her down ; that's business, and she's none so poor but she can afford to let ye have 'em cheap. They beant so much to look at, her hens ; but they're good 'uns to lay, and worth a field full o' them fancy soarts."

Olivia began to play thoughtfully with the grain left in her basket. She was very anxious for the honour of her poultry yard, and she began already to be fired with the ambition to make it a successful commercial enterprise. She had a little pocket-money put by ; she could lay that out as she pleased, without consulting anybody.

"How far off is this Long Sedge Bend?"

"A matter o' two mile an' a half. It's down by Sedge Bend coal-pit."

"And where's that?"

"Ye go along t' Sheffield Road till ye coom to t' mill. Turn to yer left, as if ye were goin' to Sheffield, till ye coom to t' Blue Boar; bear to yer left across t' fields, and that's Sedge Bend."

"Isn't there a shorter way across the fields? That must be such a long way round."

"Ay, but ye maunna go t' short way. They're a roough lot down at Long Sedge, and ye maun keep to t' road."

"Well, I shall go this very day and interview Mrs. Lund. I'm afraid, though, I shall be short of accommodation if I buy many more chickens."

"Nay, Ah'll rig ye oop some nests and a perch in t' auld toolhouse yonder. Ah can do't in an hour."

"It's awfully good of you, but you needn't hurry with it, for I shan't start till after luncheon."

"But start as early as ye can. It doan't do to be late by oneself in those parts."

"Well, I'll be sure to start in good time, and I'll take a big basket to bring some of the chickens back in."

"Best let mea fetch 'em for ye to-morrow; Ah can't get away to-day. It's not for t' loikes o' you to carry baskets o' loive stock along t' roads."

"But I can't wait—I can't wait; I must see them to-day," said this headstrong young madam, who liked to carry out her plans with the impetuosity of a whirlwind. "And as for the basket, why there isn't another farmer's daughter in Yorkshire with stronger arms than mine."

Mat looked at her mistrustfully, but he said nothing more on the subject.

"Ah'll tak' t' measure of t' toolhouse if Ah may coom in," was all he said.

Olivia was running to open the gate for him; but, with a nod of thanks he vaulted over the high fence, and set about his work without another word. The country lad had been fairly

bewitched by the beauty and brightness of this young lady, who seemed to him a creature of a different mould from any of the womenkind he had hitherto met—even from handsome Mrs. Meredith Brander. Nothing gave him so much delight as to be able to render her a small service; and even while he was taking the measurements of the toolhouse, he was pondering a way to spare her what he considered the dangers of the walk she proposed to take that afternoon. The girl herself, knowing nothing of this plan, and thinking lightly enough of the enterprise, watched his proceedings with great interest, and finally overwhelmed him with thanks which sent him home happy.

Olivia started on her walk that afternoon without a word to anybody concerning the object of her expedition. She had a purse with some of her savings in her pocket, and a large poultry basket on her arm. "I shall leave this basket somewhere when I come in sight of the cottage, and pretend I've only come to look at the chickens," she said to herself, resolved to be

very astute. But the widow Lund was more astute still, and managed to drive a very good bargain with her fair young customer. Indeed, Olivia showed such a helpless inability to distinguish between a young chicken and the hoariest-headed rooster of the lot, that it would have needed superhuman virtue not to take advantage of her. It was with a glow of unspeakable delight and pride that, having paid for a dozen hens, she said she would take half of them home with her, and, running out of the cottage, picked up the basket which she had hidden behind the hedge, and brought it to pack her live-stock in.

Poor Olivia! An unknown visitor was such a rare sight at Long Sedge that the advent of "a grand lady wi' a big basket" had been reported all over the village as she drew near the outskirts; and the widow Lund herself, with two cronies, having watched her approach, basket and all, from the door of Mrs. Perkins's washhouse, was able to appreciate at its full value the poor little ruse.

When her load was ready, Olivia quickly discovered that a basket containing six live chickens is neither a light nor a convenient burden, and perceived that to carry them back by the way she had come would be a more arduous and fatiguing task than she had imagined. When, therefore, she found there was a path across the fields which would lead up to the high road, and shorten the way by at least half a mile, the temptation was too strong for her, and, disregarding Mat's warnings, as that young man had expected her to do, she ventured fearlessly on the short cut. Half a dozen unkempt children laughed and yelled at her as she passed; a few rough-looking women whispered to each other at the doors of their dirty cottages; while a man, who was leaning against a wall smoking a short black pipe, slunk out of her way, as if conscious that she belonged to a higher type of civilisation. Mat was right: Long Sedge Bank was a rough place. The inhabitants looked wild and out of touch with the rest of humanity; the long rows of small brick

cottages, many of which were windowless and deserted, looked squalid and miserable, while over everything was that black and grimy look which the neighbourhood of a coal pit produces.

It was Saturday afternoon, and the pits were idle. A great black wheel, towering over a mound on the right, showed where lay the entrance to the nearest shaft. Round the door of a beerhouse, smaller and much more disreputable-looking than the Collier's Arms, was a group of men and boys, spending their half-holiday in dull and noisy fashion. They were a rough-looking lot, and Olivia passed them quickly. Her way lay along a cinder path over the fields, and for some time she got on very well, meeting no one, and enjoying the frosty afternoon. Just as she ran through a turnstile and followed the sudden turn of the path to the left, however, a man started up from the ground, called out "Hallo, missis!" and attempted to seize one of her feet. She was startled into uttering a low exclamation, and, rightly judging that the man was drunk, she ran on as fast as

she could, hoping to get beyond his pursuit before he could get upon his legs. But a drunken man may be able to run when he cannot walk ; and Olivia's assailant, who was a stalwart young collier with a blear-eyed and most unprepossessing face, gave chase in good earnest, and came up with her just as she came to a barrier between two fields in the shape of a very high and very primitive stile. Seeing she had no time to get over it in safety, the girl put down her basket close by the hedge, turned suddenly, and faced her pursuer.

For the first time in her life she felt thoroughly frightened, for the young man looked brutal and reckless ; but she had plenty of courage, and the terror she felt showed neither in her face, her attitude, nor in her resonant voice.

"What do you want?"

He reeled, not having expected her sudden movement.

"Ah want a look at tha pretty feace, meh dear," said he, only just distinctly enough for her to understand him.

And he gave her a tipsy leer of admiration.

"And now will you be kind enough to pass on?" said she, in a firm tone. "Or to let me pass on without further hindrance?"

"Ah'm not a-hinderin' of tha," said the young man, who was trying to stand steadily in proximity much too close to be pleasant. "Tha can goa wheer tha loikest."

Olivia looked at him doubtfully, but as he made for the moment no attempt to molest her, she began to feel reassured. "Go back, then," said she, "and let me go on."

"Nea," said he, shaking his head with an ugly grin; "Ah'm goin' to help tha over t' stile. Ah'll carry tha whiskey for tha if tha'rt civil."

"Thank you," said Olivia, taking the fellow's offers as if they were courtesies, "but I want no help, either for myself or my basket. If you wish to do me a service, you will go back and let me go on."

"Ah maun see tha over t' stile first," said he. "Coom, missis, doan't be shy."

He swooped down upon her basket, which

she snatched up so quickly that he lost his balance and fell against the wooden fence. With a rapid step she got round him, basket and all, and was in the act of mounting the first step of the stile when the young ruffian, perceiving her purpose and enraged at a blow he had received in stumbling, lurched round with unexpected agility, and laid a rough hand on her arm. She tried to wrench herself free, but the muscular strength she was so proud of was as a child's feebleness against the brute force of this man. It had never before happened to her to feel powerless like this. With teeth clenched hard, and eyes watching intently for a moment's advantage, she wrestled in utter silence with the man, who tried to force her to mount the stile.

"Tha'd better not give ma so mooch trouble, ma bonny madam," said he, roughly. "Tha'll only have to pay for 't on t' other side. An' Ah'll tak' a buss now to goa on wi'."

He put his arm round her waist and tried to kiss her; Olivia fought fiercely, still without uttering a word. In the midst of her desperate

struggles her assailant saw the girl's face change—light up with hope, with expectancy. Then, with all the force of her lungs, she suddenly shouted, "Help!" For a moment the collier was surprised into desisting from his attack, but before she could take advantage of this he recovered himself, and putting one rough and dirty hand over her mouth, growled sullenly—

"Nea, theer bean't no help for tha till Ah've done with tha."

Closing his strong fingers on her face, he pulled her head round with brutal violence, and had his own repulsive face close to hers, when he suddenly felt one strong hand laid on his shoulder and another under his chin, and his head being forced back with a jerk, he found that he was in the vigorous clutches of the vicar of St. Cuthbert's.

"Dang tha! It's t' feightin' parson!" cried the rough in a surly tone.

"Yes, and I'm going to exercise my fists on your ugly face as soon as ever you're sober, you hulking vagabond!" said Mr. Brander,

with a conspicuous lack of pastoral meekness. The man had fallen back, and, half drunk as he was, looked ashamed of himself.

"Tha maun look out for thaself if tha tries that on," he said, sullenly. Then with more assurance he went on, "Dunna think Ah care for tha bein' t' parson. It ain't mooch of a parson tha'l be when all's known. Ay," he continued, seeing that these vague words were not without effect, "theer's a mon abaht as wants tha, an' as woan't rest till e's gotten tha, and maybe before tha takes oop wi' another lass e'll mak' tha give an account o' t' one tha spirited away. Now coom on if tha loikes."

And he put himself in a fighting position.

Mr. Brander pushed him on one side so that he staggered, and picking up Olivia's basket, signed to her to get over the stile, while he turned to give a few short and sharp words of farewell to the discomfited collier. A few seconds later Olivia, who had walked quickly on in shame, relief, and confusion, heard the vicar's voice close behind her.

"And now, Miss Denison, I've a sermon ready for you."

Coming up with her, he saw that the girl, who made no answer, had tears in her eyes.

"No, I'm not going to have any mercy on you because you choose to cry," said he, pitilessly. "It's no fairer of a girl to use her tears against a man than it is for a man to use his fists against a woman. If you don't instantly leave off, I shall feel at liberty to hit you. You know you deserve it."

"Ho-ow?" asked she, tremulously.

"How! Why, by disregarding the emphatic warnings, not of one friend, but of two, and by dragging out a poor parson on Saturday, his sermon day, to protect you from the consequences of your folly."

"Dragging you out!"

"Yes. This morning comes Mat Oldshaw post-haste to me just before luncheon to say you were going off on a wild-goose—no, on a tame-hen—chase to Long Sedge Bend, and that he was certain you would come back over the very

fields which he had just assured you were unsafe for a lady."

"But, Mr. Brander," put in Olivia, in real distress, "I've always been used to take care of myself; I have never been annoyed before. It's an infamous thing that a girl shouldn't be able to do what her powers enable her to do just as well as a man!"

"Infamous, perhaps, but indisputable. It is of no use to kick against custom."

"But what is going to be the use of me, if I, a great strong creature who can do lots of work, and shall soon understand farming better than papa, can't cross the road without a footman at my heels to keep off tipsy coal-miners? Oh, dear, I wish I weren't a wretched girl!"

"You couldn't be anything else, with that illogical mind, and that extravagant way of looking at things."

"Illogical!" cried she, now really offended. "Why, papa says I have the most reasonable head he ever knew!"

"For a woman."

Olivia was at first too much offended to reply.

"I'm papa's right hand," she said at last, coldly. "I'm just like a son to him."

"I think not, Miss Denison," said the vicar, shaking his head.

"My father would tell you so himself, Mr. Brander."

"And I should not believe him, Miss Denison."

Olivia began to see that the vicar was enjoying her indignation, so she bit her lips and remained silent.

"Just think, now, what happens when you find him a little depressed and irritable. Does he dismiss you with a snub as he would one of your brothers? Does he not rather submit to a little coaxing, allow himself to be 'brought round,' and receive a kiss as a reward?"

"Yes, that is true, certainly," said she, smiling. "But that has nothing to do with the real value of the help I give him."

"Oh, but it has. It has, on the contrary, everything to do with it. Instead of complain-

ing that you are a 'wretched girl,' you must learn to understand that. What the intrinsic value of your services may be I don't know; but if you had the abilities of a Senior Wrangler they would count for nothing compared with your sympathy and love for him, and your pretty feminine way of showing it. And so, you see, as your tender womanhood is of more consequence to us—I mean to him—than all the fine masculine qualities of your intellect, you must consent to accept the protection we decree that your womanhood needs."

"Papa doesn't decree it. He says girls ought to learn to take care of themselves."

"Will he say so after to-day's adventure, do you think?"

"I shan't tell him anything about it."

"Then I shall, unless you give me your word, like a sensible girl, never to cross these fields alone again."

"Need you ask that, Mr. Brander?" said the girl, reddening.

"Well, forgive me. I don't know you well

enough to be sure how deep the headstrong vein runs."

"I am miserably sorry and ashamed to have brought you so far this afternoon."

"Are you? Oh, I have done more irksome things than that in my time, I assure you," said he drily. "Besides, I've only come from St. Cuthbert's. I'm back again in my own parsonage to-day, you know, for my brother and sister-in-law are expected this afternoon."

"Are they?" said she. "I am so anxious to see them, especially Mrs. Brander."

"Make haste on to the high road then. The pony cart has gone to meet them, and they generally come this way round from Matherham."

They were within a short distance of the road when Mr. Brander descried a little way off his sister-in-law's light wood cart and plump cob pony. Quickening their pace, Olivia excited and curious, her companion decidedly nervous, they climbed the last steps of the hill, and reached the high road a few moments before the cart came up. They stopped to recover their breath,

exchanging a merry word or two as they waited. As they drove up, Olivia, who had splendid eyesight, could see what a handsome pair the vicar of Rishton and his wife were. He was fair, serene, portly, good-humoured; she dark, erect, and blooming. They were conversing amicably as they came along, and did not notice the two people waiting by the roadside until they were close upon them, and Vernon Brander accosted them. Olivia wondered at the nervous tremor in his voice as he did so.

But she was still more surprised at the effect of this meeting upon the lady and gentleman in the cart. The serenity of the portly vicar clouded at sight of his brother; an indescribable change came over his face—a look which was not exactly disapproval, or doubt, or suspicion, or mistrust, though it partook of all those qualities, as he glanced from Mr. Vernon Brander to the beautiful girl at his side. The expression of the lady spoke more plainly still. Her eyes moved quickly from the man to the woman and back again, while her lips tightened and her forehead

puckered with evident consternation. Both lady and gentleman, whatever the cause of their annoyance might be, were self-possessed enough to give Miss Denison a kind and courteous greeting when Mr. Vernon Brander, with evident nervousness, introduced her. Learning that Olivia had been buying poultry, Mrs. Brander inspected the purchase with great interest, but pronounced two of the birds to be very old roosters indeed. She then told her brother-in-law that they were going straight home to an early dinner, and told him to make haste to the Vicarage, as they should expect him to join them.

Then they drove off, leaving Olivia with the uncomfortable impression that they disapproved of her acquaintance with Mr. Vernon Brander in the strongest possible manner.

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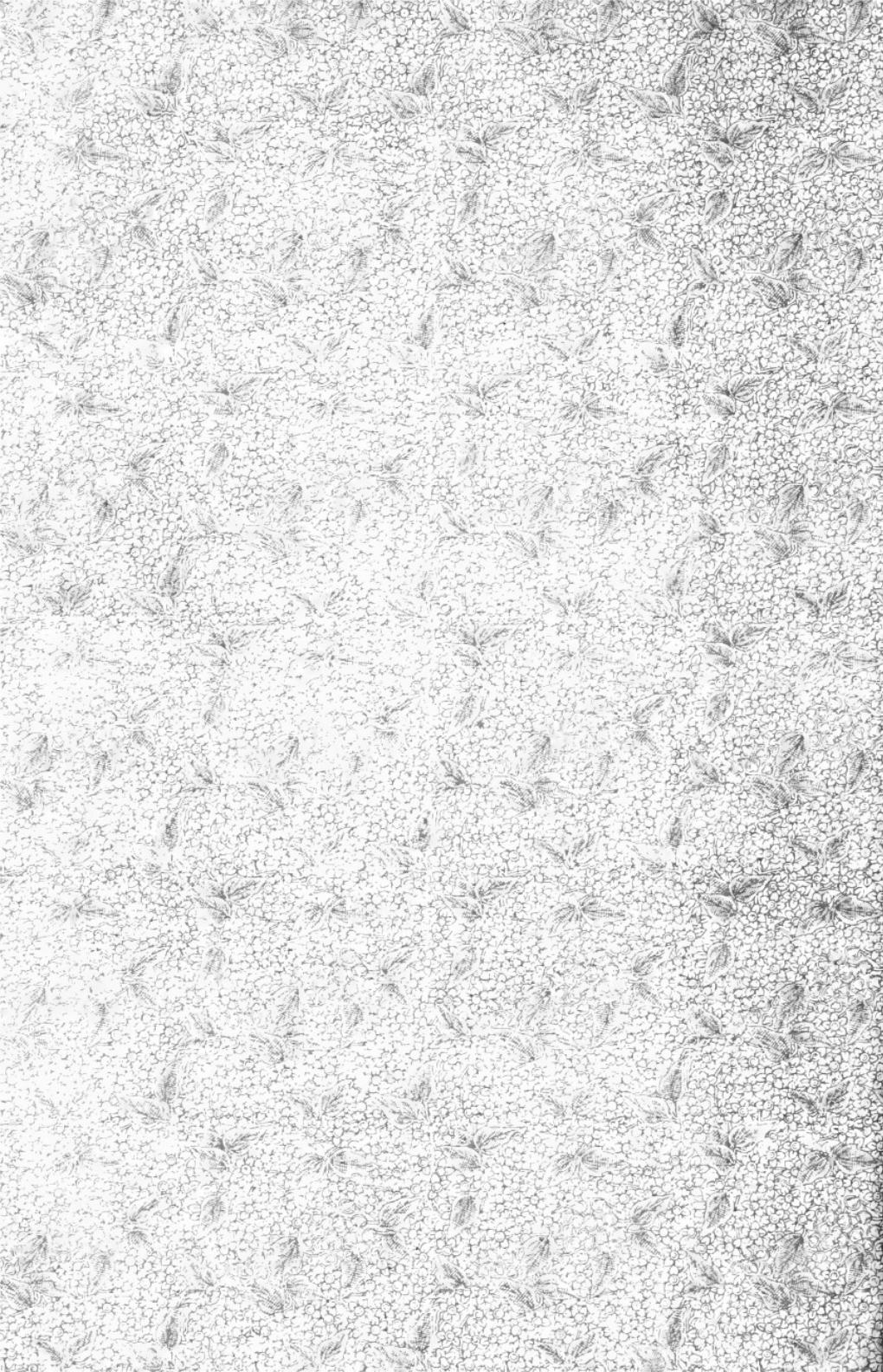
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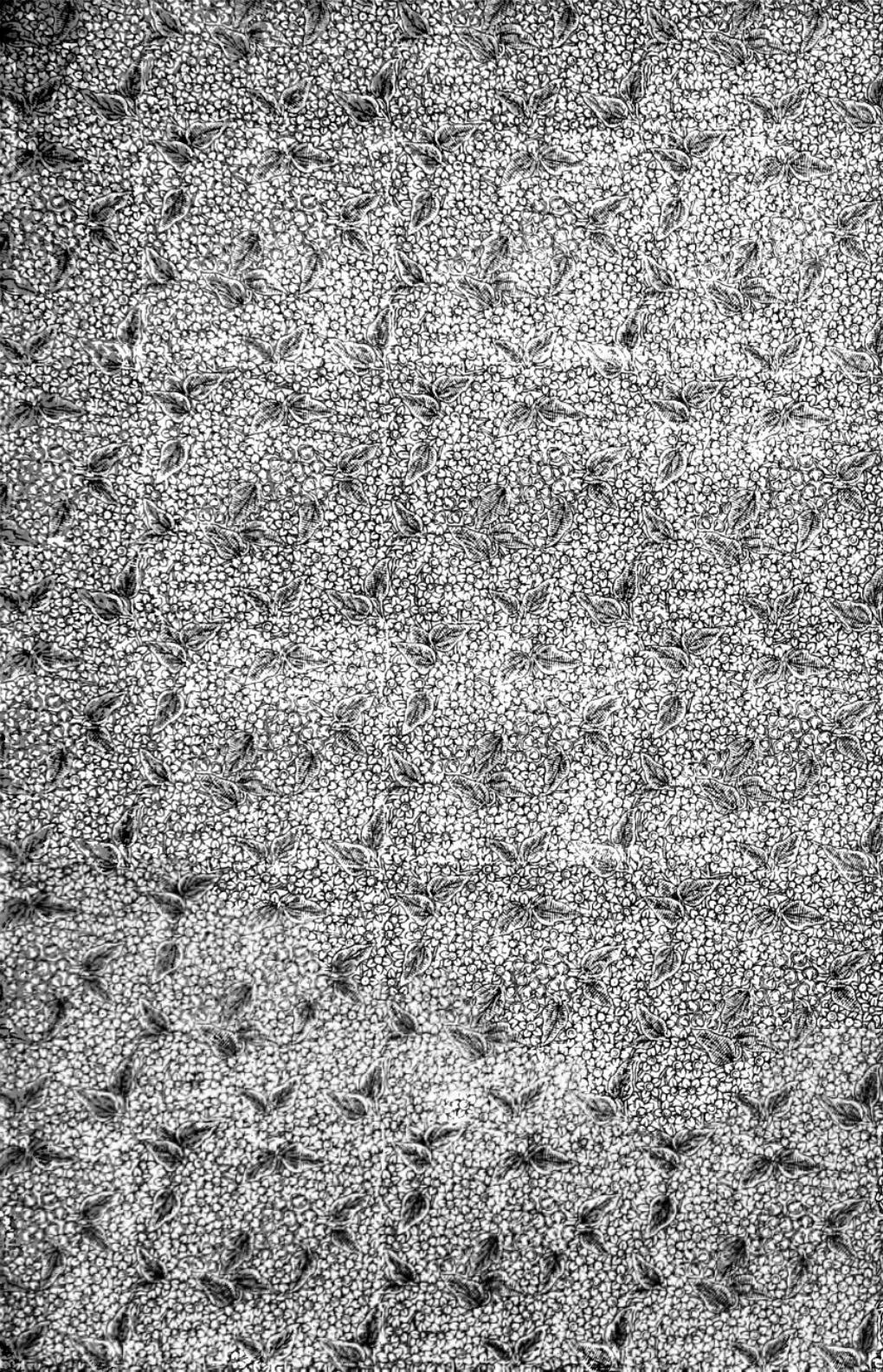
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